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LIFE WITH THE MET

HELEN NOBLE

*LIFE
WITH THE
MET*



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS NEW YORK

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*Published on the same day in the Dominion
of Canada by Thomas Allen, Ltd., Toronto.*

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 54-5490

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

VAN REES PRESS • NEW YORK

*To Sarah Butler, without whose devoted friendship,
encouragement and help this might never have been
written, and in happy memory of Nanny, my mother.*

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*When Time who steals our years away
Shall steal our pleasures too,
The memory of the past will stay
And half our joys renew.*

THOMAS MOORE

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CHAPTER I

IT HAPPENED

INDIAN summer in New York, a warm crystalline luminous day, October 27, 1947—a day on which to stretch out one's arms to embrace the shining lovely world, to breathe deeply, to feast the eyes, to feel emotion, to live fully.

Standing on the steps of St. Bartholomew's Church on Park Avenue I watch the past, the present, the future of the Metropolitan Opera family passing through the handsome bronze doors. Edward Ziegler is being buried.

A man of charm, wit, of great abilities, superb in storytelling, an astounding dynamo of energy and of action, known throughout the musical world: Edward Ziegler, the backbone of the Met, my Boss for many years, is dead.

Slipping into the church and to a seat, my tear-filled eyes blur my vision. I look toward the choir stalls where once I sat and sang as a member of the choir, and a feeling of being at home brings me some comfort.

A lump rises in my throat!

Ushers are numerous and busy, for this is to be a large funeral. The family has had the services moved from the chapel to the main church to afford room for all the friends and business associates who wish to attend. They begin

arriving, artists from the Met and the concert stage, conductors, musicians, and the curious crowd that always gathers where celebrities are to be found.

A beautiful mezzo from the Met comes down the aisle escorted by an usher, making an entrance even here. There, across from me, sits Carlo Edwards, an assistant conductor and one of Mr. Ziegler's protégés, looking as though he too would soon be gone. At one side of the nave, subdued and sorrowful, the electricians and stagehands and porters of the Metropolitan sit together. Socialites are arriving, and patrons of music and the opera, and concert managers by the dozen.

Royal Cortissoz, the famous art critic and an old friend, sits with bowed head and my eyes rest on him with sympathy. He and Frank Crowninshield, who is also present, are among the few old cronies—Mr. Ziegler's own word for his close friends—who are now left. Mr. Otto Kahn is gone and so is Gatti-Casazza and Edward Bok of Philadelphia. So too are James Huneker, the great music critic, and Calvin G. Child, of the Victor Talking Machine Company.

These men were among Mr. Ziegler's preferred friends and associates. What wonderful times they had together! Visits, dinners, and midnight sessions at which the most fascinating conversations were carried on, about art and music and drama and literature and life. And always, to climax the occasion, there would be one of Mr. Ziegler's scintillating stories. On this beautiful October day I think of them all and I hope and pray that they will be together again some day, enjoying one of their memorable evenings.

The artist at the organ fills the stately church with the soft, lovely strains of Bach. (My choice would have been the "Liebestod" from *Tristan*, Mr. Ziegler's special favorite.) My Boss's beloved daughter, Suzanne, with her husband, slips quietly into the front pew. The clergy enters and ascends the chancel steps.

Here might be a scene from a great drama upon our own Met stage. The handsome Byzantine pillars that reach toward the arched roof frame the scene. The beautiful altar is lit by slender lighted candles in gleaming candelabra, and the golden vases are filled with Easter lilies. The chancel and steps and choir stalls are banked with a resplendent profusion of flowers. In the background the sad, gentle music goes on. I think of *Parsifal* and Titurel's funeral, but this is, alas, reality.

Soon the service is over, the aisles crowded.

A charming little old lady lays her fragile hand upon my arm and says: "Helen, you *are* Helen, are you not?" It is Mrs. James Huneker and she is deeply moved too.

"My husband and Ned Ziegler were such good friends," she says softly, "and now they are both gone. I feel somehow as though this were the end of an era." Suddenly I know that this is true. The end of an era of great names and great accomplishments.

We walk together to the door, Mrs. Huneker and I, and I help her to her car. The brightness and glory of the day startle me anew as we emerge from the church doors. Death has come and gone and life begins again.

The church steps and the street are crowded, greetings are being called.

"Oh hello, darrrling, I haven't seen you in ages!"

"Why, Madame, how *are* you? We haven't met since Paris!"

Pictures are being snapped and some of the stars even give autographs. Then the crowd drifts off into private cars and cabs and the Waldorf-Astoria down the street. I hear a voice saying: "There will never be another Ziegler!" And another answers: "True, too true."

Too full for chatter I choose to walk downtown to the Opera House. My memories will keep me company. Like

the speedy reversal of a camera reel my thoughts flash back to one day when I turned a corner, and the side door of the famous Met opened unexpectedly for me to enter.

Let me think . . . when *did* I first meet my Boss?

The ease with which I walked into employment at the Met astonishes me even today. In years to come I was to see a thousand and more applicants turned down with as many different excuses, even when the hopeful ones had letters from the most influential persons.

I happened along at a psychological moment one February afternoon more than twenty years ago, young, red-haired, inexperienced. I walked in and asked for work. In half an hour the Technical Department had a new secretary and the Met became my second home.

That important Saturday in my life I had come to town from my home on Long Island to pick up some music left at my voice teacher's studio. The winter just drawing to an end I had spent in Chicago, visiting the family of my late fiancé who had died suddenly of pneumonia. Now I felt ready to resume voice lessons and perhaps to find some work to do. Anything to keep busy.

Walking down Broadway after my lesson, as I reached Fortieth Street and the Opera House, I interrupted my wandering thoughts and turned into the block, pausing to study the posters of the week's operas. Like most young people studying voice, singing in a choir, interested in all things musical, the Met was the mecca of music to me. Suddenly the thought came: how wonderful it would be to work here! Fate must have had a hand in it. Nearing a small side door of the Met I saw a man exit quickly, and without a moment of hesitation I put out my hand, held the door, and entered.

What had I expected? Something elegant in keeping with

the glamorous auditorium of the Opera House where I had thrilled to Farrar in *Madame Butterfly* and *Carmen*? Perhaps I hoped to hear lovely music in the air, perhaps to catch a glimpse of a great singer offstage.

I found myself in a small, crowded, messy entrance hall. Before me a sign plainly said SILENCE PLEASE but a noisy buzz and hubbub filled the air. Men lounged against the walls with sheets of green paper in their hands. (Racing forms, I later found out they were!) Girls dashed in and punched a time clock and dashed out. A few especially choice swear words cut the air. There was a dirty white stand holding a large inverted glass bottle of water in the corner. Several men were clustered around it, reaching for paper cups.

I stood and stared until a gruff voice brought me to.

"What do *you* want?" Penetrating eyes looked me over.

A huge man with a big head and a great shock of white hair covered by a ten-gallon hat sat behind a table-desk. He looked so threatening I was tempted to turn and run. Answering the first thing that came to mind I said: "I'm looking for work here."

He kept his piercing eyes steadily on me and they rested for an instant on the music roll under my arm. "We don't want any singers," he replied with finality.

"Oh, I don't want to sing," I hastened to reassure him.

"Well, what kind of work? Our season is half over," he said, still belligerent.

"Any kind of work," I answered eagerly, but he turned impatiently to matters on his desk. It was a dismissal.

"Wait a moment," someone called. Detaching himself from a group, a man large in frame, stooped, with a big cigar drooping from the corner of his mouth, came toward me. He looked a bit like the Winston Churchill of today.

"I'm Mr. Siedle." (He pronounced it Seed-el.) "Can you type?"

"Oh, yes!" I smiled at him.

"Come on up to my office," and he indicated a stairway. We went up the stone steps of a long flight of stairs, through office doors, and into his private office.

What a dingy room! It was cluttered with books, papers, boxes, wigs, and full of a truly startling and heterogeneous collection of furniture, hangings, materials, and odds and ends. I kept my eyebrows from arching and stared politely.

The interview was short, for I had no references to show. I said truthfully that my typing was fair but would improve, that I loved music and beautiful things, and that to work at the Met must be exciting and wonderful, the thing I wanted most to do. None of this really warranted my engagement, yet Mr. Siedle hired me without further questioning. I was quite surprised.

"My secretary left suddenly yesterday to be married," he explained. "The salary will be twenty-two fifty a week. Could you start on Monday?"

Could I!

Back through the offices and doors and down the stairs I found my way, and out past the gargantuan guardian at the door, who gave me a quick, sharp look from under his bushy brows. But now who cared if he glowered—even though I was the newest and the lowliest of the Met's big family, I belonged.

Would that old Long Island train never get me home with the news! How surprised my mother would be. The day after tomorrow . . . hurry up, old train, I thought, Helen must get her working wardrobe ready.

CHAPTER 2

THE THREE-RING CIRCUS

LIKE all newcomers I was bright and early on my new job on Monday morning. The same unwelcoming bulldog greeted me with a snappy: "What are you doing here so early? No one gets here at this time of the morning." (It was quarter to nine.)

Well, you do, I said to myself, but wisely I answered only: "I am Mr. Siedle's new secretary." What a wonderful feeling of confidence that gave me!

Grumbling a bit to himself, my huge friend arose from behind his desk to his full height, and he was truly a handsome figure. He went upstairs ahead of me, unlocked the door to the Technical Department, and departed without another word.

Inside the door a short hall and a small creaky gate led into a big room, and another door opened into Mr. Siedle's private office. The big room held drafting tables and desks and chairs and a row of new cabinets along one wall. On the floor were heaps and heaps of dusty piles of folders and photographs. I felt like beginning a housecleaning job right away.

A typewriter on one of the desks caught my eye and I sat down to practice. Might as well get used to it. I typed

for an hour until, around ten o'clock, the place suddenly came to life.

Thomas Hillary came in first and introduced himself and gave me a nice warm welcome. He was a friendly chap and spoke with a pleasing slight Irish brogue. I noticed his neat dress, a traditional blue business suit, and a good-looking tie. He was short, and slight, and prematurely gray, and had nice pink cheeks. Altogether quite natty and pleasing and businesslike.

"What do you do, Mr. Hillary?" I asked.

"Oh, call me Tommy," he said. "We're all friends around here. What do I do? Huh—everything. You'll learn that at the Met you have to do anything and everything that comes up. We all pitch in to keep the show going. You'll find yourself doing all sorts of things in no time, I'll wager."

Then he looked at me rather seriously and went on: "You mustn't think of this as a regular office with each one doing a special job. Opera-making is like no other business in the whole world. We happen to be in the technical end of it, but you will find the department is as full of art and temperament as any of the stars' dressing rooms. And don't think you can keep regular business hours here. Time means nothing in our lives. It's only curtain-time that counts. You eat when you can, and you count yourself lucky to get home to bed at all."

Wow, Helen, I said to myself, what have you let yourself in for? But nothing was going to discourage me this morning.

Tommy's office was to the right as one came into the big room, and he was the businessman of the department. A good business head like Tommy's, I was to learn, was much needed among so many artistic temperaments. He interviewed the hundreds of salesmen who came in and out, showing samples of canvas and paint and materials and the

many items used in the technical production of opera. He knew quality and costs and kept a stern eye on expenditures. Tommy had a good sense of humor, too, and we chatted and laughed that first morning, and started a friendship that remains warm today.

The next arrival was a tall lanky young man who welcomed me with a nice smile, said he was Walter Jagemann, and that my desk was to be opposite his.

"Call on me for help as often as needed," he said.

I looked across at him surreptitiously. The artistic type, I decided. His clothes were loose and easy, his hair a bit long, his eyes deep and dreamy, his manner gentle. I liked him.

"Tommy has been telling me about his work," I said. "What do you do?"

"Oh, nothing much."

"Nothing much! What do you mean by that?"

"I do the general cleaning around here. You'll see." And with that I had to be satisfied.

Time was to make me aware of Walter's fine artistic abilities. He could paint beautifully and design scenes, and had wonderful ideas which Mr. Siedle used. He had been just a young boy when he came to the Met but soon he was in the midst of all the technical and scenic plans upon which Mr. Siedle was working. Walter was a natural craftsman and artist and mighty handy to have around. In his own quiet way he had revolutionized many of the old-time technical procedures that for years no one had taken time to simplify or to modernize. Finally, and naturally, Walter Jagemann had become Mr. Siedle's assistant and the technicians and heads of departments were continually turning to him for advice and help.

For an artist Walter had the unusual quality of being firm and decisive, and he was also a diplomat in putting over

new ideas. He loved music and was well read. He had a real passion for Lincolniana. All this I found out as time went on.

My new boss, Eduard Siedle, was the last to arrive on this first morning. With him came Mrs. Siedle who led four dogs of assorted breeds and sizes, all on leashes. I was introduced to one and all, and Mrs. Siedle, having looked the new secretary over, said goodbye and left. The dogs remained. A good thing it was that I love animals, for it became part of my duties, whenever they were left at the office, to take them out for necessary walks. They certainly were a handful to manage!

Mrs. Siedle was headed for an auction sale. Auctions were her joy and her obsession, and many the *objets d'art* and the *objets* just plain *chromo*, with which she filled the Siedle Studios, or so her husband said. Mr. Siedle owned a warehouse which rented out stage properties of every conceivable kind. At times he used for the Met some of his wife's purchases, but for the most part he complained bitterly to us of the everlasting buying that filled his storehouse to the overflow point. Evidently he did not protest very effectively to Mrs. Siedle, for she went on buying and buying and having a wonderful time for years.

As a working day my first was a total loss. I remember that Mr. Siedle gave me one letter and a revised list of properties to copy. The rest of the day I spent getting acquainted. Not a moment of the eight hours was boring though. Such fascinating things kept happening.

A chorus girl came in to protest loudly to Mr. Siedle that the mirror over her make-up table must, simply must, be changed. When she looked into it she saw herself cross-eyed. The facetious remarks of the bystanding technicians enraged her and a wordy battle ensued. She flounced out without any promise of a change in mirrors.

A more important caller came, a woman artist, to weep

madly on Mr. Siedle's shoulder because she was not to have a new costume for her next role. Wouldn't "dear darrling Siedle" do something about it? Darrling Siedle promised to see what could be done, she kissed him, turned off the tears and left beaming, making a dramatic exit for the benefit of the room.

Past me, into the inner sanctum, went part of the great dragon used in *Siegfried*, a handsome chair from Flora's ballroom in *La Traviata*, a beautiful costume for *Aida*. Nothing in the technical line was used until Mr. Siedle had seen it and approved.

That day I even had a glimpse of the Met's *première danseuse*, the famous Rosina Galli, who arrived to consult Mr. Siedle about a stage setting. She came into the room, ignoring us all, and went directly to Mr. Siedle. She said, with irritation in her voice: "Siedle, this sketch is wrong!" and waved it like a fan under his nose. Then she told him exactly what she wanted. I sensed a strong, disturbing personality, but she floated about like a dream walking, so graceful, so ethereal. Every gesture of hers was a movement of beauty. I became an instant admirer—of her art.

The chief electrician came in and other heads of departments, and the wardrobe mistress. They stopped to talk with me. A dozen salesmen were in and out with tools and gadgets new to me. One brought gorgeous materials that I oh'd and ah'd over. The place was bedlam all day. I felt I had been hired to take part in a three-ring circus—and did I love every moment of it!

Working late one evening, just two weeks after this, I heard the little wobbly gate at the end of the room suddenly bang back. In strode Mr. Gatti-Casazza, the general manager, and Mr. Edward Ziegler. I knew who they were, of course: the King and the Crown Prince of the Metropolitan

Opera House, but here, for the first time, I was in their exalted presences.

Gatti, close at hand, was a big overpowering man, something in the neighborhood of six foot and, to my youthful point of view, some three hundred pounds in weight. I'm sure I overestimated his bulk, but he looked that large to me that night. He came into the room screaming at the very top of his voice, gesticulating, hitting each desk with his fist as he passed. One unceasing rage of words, all in Italian, poured out. I was scared and sat quiet as an awestruck mouse. It looked as though Gatti were bearing down on Mr. Siedle to haul off and hit him a wallop, and I feared for him. But I need not have worried. Gatti swung about and up and down the room again, the vehement stream of words filling the place with furious sound.

Mr. Ziegler—what a contrast to Gatti in both appearance and manner—stood quietly at the side with his hands clasped loosely in front of him. He was shorter than Gatti and perhaps half his bulk. As Gatti began to falter, Mr. Ziegler started to interpret to Mr. Siedle. It was then that I suddenly felt better and even saw a funny side to the attack. All this tremendous rage that Gatti had worked up—and Siedle could not even understand a word of it! Mr. Ziegler translated in a dignified manner and tempered the language. Undoubtedly the presence of a new and young female secretary saved Mr. Siedle a more literal translation that evening. Mr. Ziegler said it very simply: Madame Galli was displeased. She felt that Siedle was not co-operating. Mr. Gatti wants this corrected at once. Madame Galli's wishes are to be carried out *exactly and immediately*. Now and in the future. Mr. Ziegler might have added, *or else*, but he didn't.

Suddenly the storm was over and Mr. Gatti and Mr. Ziegler left as speedily as they had arrived. The quiet in the room was like a blessed calm after an alarming thunder

squall. I looked over at Mr. Siedle, not knowing what to say. He had been completely silent all through the episode. He had remained sitting in his chair, puffing on the big cigar that as usual was in the corner of his mouth. As far as I could see there had not even been a rise in his color.

"You know what that was about?" Mr. Siedle asked me. "*Cherchez la femme!* Galli isn't satisfied with the ballet costumes. She's ripped Gatti to pieces, she's thrown the book at him. Now he comes to jump on me!" With a shrug he continued: "They want to get rid of me. I know that."

Even in my short time at the Met I had become aware of the feud going on between the Thirty-ninth and Fortieth Street sides of the big house. The executive and the technical departments were out of tune. Here was visible and truly audible proof of this.

While Mr. Ziegler had been translating, Gatti had been striding about, pulling the hairs in his nose in a most inelegant way, an unconscious habit I was later to become familiar with. I thought both men horrible. Lucky me to be on Mr. Siedle's side of the house!

"Well, young lady," said Mr. Siedle, "I'm not in a mood to finish that work tonight. Better run for your train."

The big office in which Walter Jagemann and I worked was the meeting place for the whole Technical Department. It was the complaint desk, the gossip and scandal sheet, the platform for political debate, the chamber for whispered confidences. The latest "sure dope" on the next horse race or wrestling match or big prizefight was always available. To some it was a refuge and a sanctuary; they would slip into a corner for a smoke and to "get away from it all." Others turned it into a free-for-all battleground. It was quite a room. The traffic through the place my first weeks there was a little heavier than usual, Walter told me with a grin,

because the news had gotten about that a new redhead was in Tech. I was being looked over.

I looked around myself and asked questions. New and as yet unpainted cabinets lined one whole side of the room. Walter told me that he had built them himself, and that he hoped I would help salvage and file the hundreds of old photographs of opera scenes and of stars in costume that were piled on the floor along two sides of the room. These were the dusty heaps that had caught my eye the first day.

Walter went on to say that he and Tommy had found the photographs there when they had come to the Met. In sheer desperation the boys had decided to create a filing system for these priceless records, over which the dust of goodness-knows-how-many-years lay thickly. The new cabinets had been the first step.

I was delighted to join in the task, to dust and sort and file and exclaim over each interesting photograph. Working in our spare time it took the three of us several months to complete the project.

Strangely enough, very few of the many who frequented the big room remarked upon our achievement and Mr. Siedle neither noticed nor mentioned it. During the whole period of salvaging Mr. Siedle passed in and out daily, stepping aside for the piles of stuff in his way, obviously aware of what we were doing, yet giving not a single indication of approval or disapproval. Undoubtedly he thought we were young fools. Anyway, indelibly etched on Mr. Siedle's brain was a reproduction of every opera, every scene produced at the Met during his time. He needed no reference to records to recall any setting. "So," he probably said to himself, "why do these young fools put so much effort and trouble and overwork into unnecessary tasks? I'm here to answer any questions about past productions."

As more and more of the unsightly mess came off the floor

it was decided that we might as well carry our reforms further. Walter and Tommy gave the big room its first coat of paint in many years. How we wished that we might tackle Mr. Siedle's office! But his sanctum sanctorum had been in disorder for years, and it remained untouched as long as he occupied it. A swish around with the broom and duster, a daily emptying of the wastepaper basket—that was all he allowed.

It astonished me to find artistic and beautiful stage settings being conceived in such clutter and dirt. Mr. Siedle truly loved beauty and works of art, but of this his room gave no indication. Probably the very thought of the effort necessary to clear and clean up the staggering mess of furniture, *objets d'art*, wall hangings, wigs, costumes, materials, boxes and boxes of papers, must have been overwhelming, and he chose the easier way of ignoring it all. He seemed happy enough in the midst of his clutter. Walter and Tommy and I were the only ones who cared, and we finally had to accept the fact that our housecleaning and redecorating must stop right at the threshold of the Boss's room.

"Hey, Helen, get me some information, will you?" said a technician one morning, stopping at my desk. "I've got to know how many acts we did in the last *Parsifal*."

"And where do I dig up that information?" I inquired.

"Er . . . well . . . I don't know exactly. Maybe you've got an old program around somewhere? Anyway, kid, I've got to have it. Take a look around like a good girl, huh?" And off he went.

I poked into every file cabinet in the big room and into those out in the hallway, and even invaded a storeroom, packed to the ceiling, with dust an inch thick everywhere. In disgust, dirty and tired, I finally gave up.

Tommy Hillary came back from his luncheon date and I tackled him.

"Tommy, for goodness sake, *where* is the program file?"

"Program file!" You would think I had asked for a seat for opening night, he was so astonished.

"Yes, program file. You know, the paper folders the ushers hand out downstairs before performances. Tells who's in the opera and . . ."

"Hold it, Redhead, take it easy," Tommy laughed at me. "Never saw a program file in this office. Come to think of it, I did see bundles of old programs in some closet somewhere, when I was looking for something else. But they have a set in the treasurer's office you might get to look at. They won't let it out of their sight. I think it's the only one in the building."

I said to myself, what a place! Valuable information in priceless old programs and nobody has ever filed them for safekeeping. Hadn't any secretary before my time ever thought of a filing system? Everybody seemed too interested in the more dramatic side of this opera business to give time to humdrum tasks. Right then and there I appointed myself a committee of one to hunt for old programs and to begin a new file of present and future ones.

When Walter came in I talked with him and he too remembered seeing old bundles, which he thought might be programs, in some closets down the hall. I'd start my search there.

Had Mr. Siedle been around the office that day I could undoubtedly have secured the information from him, since it was quite nicely filed away in his remarkable brain. But he wasn't in, and I thought to myself, that's just the point. When he isn't here there is no such information available. What's going to happen when he is no longer about? Hadn't anyone ever planned for that?

Mr. Garlichs, the treasurer, allowed me to look at his set of programs and I found the information the technicians needed and passed it along. Mr. Garlichs explained to me that he used the programs in making up pay checks for the singers, and then kept them in case of needed reference. He wouldn't let a single copy leave his office for fear it might not be returned. He was adamant about it and I did not blame him. I told him my idea of starting files for the Technical Department and he encouraged me to go ahead.

As soon as possible I started my treasure hunt. I dug into all the old closets I could find, into drawers of discarded desks, into every hidden corner. Pile by pile I unearthed the precious material. When no more could be found anywhere, Walter and I began to sort the programs, season by season, until—believe it or not—we had an almost complete file covering almost twenty years of opera at the Met.

Walter and I then plagued Mr. Siedle until he finally consented to have the programs bound in volumes. We made a cross-reference file and were well repaid for the labor involved by the delight we had in looking over the old material, finding the names of famous singers and their roles, and forgotten operas. Nowadays several complete sets are kept at the Met, but we did, perhaps, deserve some credit for saving and establishing the program files and forming the habit for others to follow.

Walter did another good thing. He asked to have copies of every picture taken at the Met sent to the Technical Department. Soon the stage directors and others of the technical staff came to depend upon our reference files. We knew then that the system was working and that our time had been well spent.

One thing in the Technical Department I worked to destroy rather than to save—mice. Hundreds of them! It happened this way. The technicians and stagehands often

had long waits while rehearsals were going on in the auditorium. What better to do than to send out for sandwiches and drinks, and gather in the big room to chat, to play chess, to keep track of the latest racing news, and to eat? Thus there were always crumbs about, offering plenty of temptation for hungry mice.

The first time I saw a half-dozen mice running along the baseboard I had the usual woman's reaction and tried to climb up on my desk. The hardhearted men in the room laughed heartily. I told Walter when he came along that I intended to do something about the mice and that I was going to ask Mr. Siedle if I could get a cat. I'd be willing to supply the milk and liver. I got a funny grin from Walter. He said to go ahead and try the idea out on the Boss.

"Mr. Siedle," I said as I barged into his sanctum after lunch, when I thought he would be in a good mood, "do you know that we are overrun with mice outside? I'd like to try to get rid of them. Would you mind if I got a cat? I'll feed it."

"*No! No! No!*" he exploded, startling me. "Don't you *dare* kill them. They've done you no harm. They are innocent little things. I will not have them killed! You must not set traps either. I won't have it, do you hear? *I won't have it!*"

"All right, all right," I said placatingly, backing out of the room, and making for Walter who sat at his desk, doubled up with laughter.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I demanded of him. "Why, he's like a madman on the subject."

"You wouldn't have believed me unless you heard him yourself," Walter said. "He has an aversion that amounts to a phobia about killing anything."

"Fine, just fine!" I snapped. "Let's shoo them all into his room for him to love and cherish."

We never did get rid of the mice entirely, though Walter, Tommy, and I, in sheer self-defense later on, had to do a little undercover work. I imagine some of their descendants are still making their home in the Opera House.

Speaking of mice at the Met reminds me of other animals we had around—much nicer ones—used in performances. Especially an old horse used in *Aida* and in *Götterdämmerung*. Backstage, waiting to go on, the animal would look like the most broken down old nag (my apologies to the Ben Hur stables—but it was true!). Then the cue music would come in and the horse would perk up, trot on, and give a perfect performance. An old trouser with plenty of ham!

Just once the expected did happen. The old horse added his own special performance to a scene in *Aida*, to the confusion of those on stage and to the utter delight of the audience. There was a split second when voices and instruments wavered, and then carried on as usual while the audience was still snickering. Those of us in the wings were convulsed with laughter. The way the scene was going made it all seem very apropos. It hasn't happened again—yet.

The chess games that went on in the Technical Department were really serious matters. The Germans and Austrians on the technical staff loved to play, were expert, and so dead-in-earnest over their games that I sometimes thought the international championship was at stake. The stage managers liked to play and joined in too. Tommy Hillary acquired quite a reputation as a chessman and also as a card player, hearts and rummy being the games. Of course the universal game at the Met was playing the horses. Racing forms caught my eye the first day I entered the building and were still plainly visible when I resigned some twenty years later.

Another kind of game went on in the summertime when

the business of opera slows down. Those of us concerned hoped that not too many people knew about it. With the winter season ended, the spring tour on its way, Gatti-Casazza in Europe, conductors and artists scattered all over the world, the auditorium shrouded for the hot weather, a strange silence and relaxation came to the Opera House—the whole atmosphere of the one-block-square building changed. Those of us who were left behind were bored and wished often that we had this spare time to use when the rush began again. So we began to play ball.

Every afternoon, all summer long, we played in the chorus room. This was a big, bare room with mirrors around the walls. We had two teams and the general rules of baseball prevailed, but this game had to be different—we had but three members to a team. Being the Gal Friday of the Technical Department I was the only female member, and I took my knockings-about, and bruises, and bawlings-out, as well as any of the others.

What wonderful games we played! The powers-that-be must have been aware of what was going on as we were far from silent, but no one complained or called a halt to our activities. Once we broke a mirror, but a friend in Technical quickly replaced it. The ball was made of electrician's tape—and believe me it was hard and durable!

One day we outdid ourselves. A beautiful high ball soared toward our bleachers and hit the fire-sprinkler system overhead. A deluge of water drenched us before we could escape. We had an uproarious moment trying to find the turn-off spigot and finally had to run for help. It was our good luck that the Niagara was confined to one room. Also that Mr. Ziegler was away on the spring tour. Though Mr. Ziegler rarely invaded the technical side of the house, if that had been the one time he crossed over, my career might have ended right there and then.

We dried out and cleaned up the chorus room. (It is an ill wind that blows no good!) Next day we were playing ball again, though with warnings to each other to be less ferocious in the future.

On the calendar sheet, my second day at the Met, I jotted down: *Today I typed my first Memo*. Perhaps it was as well not to know how many thousands were ahead. Mr. Siedle dictated the first memorandum and I remember it perfectly:

MEMO

La Tosca

Backdrop sky too blue.

Couch second act must be reupholstered.

SIEDLE

Copies were to be made and I was instructed to hand-deliver one to each head of department. Mr. Siedle named them over: Head of Stagehands, Head Electrician, Head of Properties, Head Scenic Artist, Head Carpenter, Baggage and Storehouse Head. If a Memo contained mention of costumes or curtains a copy was to go also to the Wardrobe Mistress.

The reception of the memorandum, which I duly delivered, soon deflated my feeling of being on an important mission. The men, each in turn, read the notice, crumpled it up, and tossed it aside, remarking: "I know that damn well," and started friendly conversations with me. In my inexperience I was deeply worried about their indifference and feared for my lovely new job if the backdrop in *Tosca* remained too blue.

The heads knew their jobs perfectly, however, as I soon learned. But I also learned through experience that it was wiser never, never to forget to deliver a Memo. If something

were forgotten Mr. Siedle would give the men merry hell, and they in turn would be only too happy to have a whipping-boy—in this case a whipping-girl. After all, the Gal Friday of the Technical Department had to be able to take it like a man!

In delivering one of my first Memos I met Joseph Novak, head scenic artist at the Met, and one of the finest in his field. I liked him on the spot, and later that same week I began to like him even better. He came into our office one afternoon after luncheon and sat down with a group of technicians, off to one side of the big room. I could not help but overhear the conversation.

The group was discussing one of the younger ballerinas who was to have a baby, father unknown. "At least, she refuses to name him," one of the men said. "I could hit him with a spitball when he sings on Saturday," another remarked, and there was a murmur of assent around the group.

"The ballet girls say her parents have disowned her, damn them," said one of the men, "and the girls are trying to help her out."

It was Mr. Novak who spoke up and said: "Now is the time for her parents to stand by her. What kind of people are they? Maybe we can all chip in and help financially. I have children of my own and I'd never want to see one treated like that."

My heart went out immediately to Mr. Novak and he retained a warm spot in it as long as he lived. It was no surprise to find later, as I came to know him, that he had a wonderfully sympathetic and understanding nature, and that he was the father of a fine family of nine children.

One of his sons he nicknamed Will Shakespeare Novak, in the hope that he would be a brilliant writer. But Will S. took to reptiles instead. His father discovered this one night when, glancing up from the dinner table, he saw two large

snakes, which had escaped from his son's room, crawling over the doorsill. Another son, Bob, used to visit his father backstage and I remember him telling me often that one day he would be singing out there "just like Caruso." Today Bob is a producer at WOR and probably much happier and better off than if he had to worry continually about his voice. Yolanda, one of the youngest of the Novaks, and a dear, often was our baby Trouble in the opera *Madame Butterfly*.

As head scenic artist at the Met, Mr. Novak stood upon his precarious perch high on the Paint Bridge over the stage, retouching old scenery and painting new. I used to watch him and marvel at the expertness and art that produced perfect perspective and beautiful effects even when painted from such a dizzy height and such an unsteady platform.

The Paint Bridge is suspended at the back of the stage, forty-two feet above it. It is a narrow platform, eight feet wide, and stretches seventy feet across the stage to entrances at either side on the fourth floor of the Thirty-ninth and Fortieth Street sides of the building. The Bridge has no railings. This is because the great canvas drops on which the artist has to work hang down on either side and a railing would interfere with the painting. A couple of tables hold paints and brushes, canvas patches and glue pots, and other paraphernalia. Sometimes Mr. Novak and an assistant would be working on two canvases at once, one canvas on either side, giving a false sense of security when you crossed the Bridge. (I always preferred it that way.)

The great stage and auditorium cut the Opera House through the center to the fourth floor. If you are upstairs on the Thirty-ninth Street side, the quickest way across to the other side of the house is over the Paint Bridge. Otherwise you must go downstairs, cross the stage, and go up again. This particular day I had an important message to deliver quickly and the Bridge it had to be—my first time

across! My heart pounded, my teeth clamped together, and I thought I swayed toward the open side, but I made it. After that I learned to use the Bridge freely, but I have never felt entirely comfortable nor secure while on it.

The Paint Bridge was Mr. Novak's second home. Though the audience was unaware of it, he was often up there painting away during performances. He could hear the music from the stage up there—he had a seat for all performances including opening night. But I can't say that I ever envied him!

CHAPTER 3

PLOT HAPPY

IF I were to choose a subtitle for these recollections it could be: *Plot Happy, or Madness at the Met*. My impression the day I was hired was that I had been employed as secretary to Mr. Siedle. But this idea soon sailed out of my mind like Lohengrin in his swan boat, never to be heard of again. Actual secretarial duties for Mr. Siedle were limited, but the involvements of the Technical Department were endless. First and foremost was Plots.

One of the stagehands brought me a Hanging Plot on one of the first mornings I was at the Met. He explained that each piece of scenery has a number, and that the Hanging Plot lists the number and the instructions for hanging each piece from the flies. Not only are these Plots used constantly at the Met, they are sent ahead to auditoriums across the country when the spring tour begins. The Plot for a long opera may run to ten or more pages. Here was my first and I studied it. Part of it read:

Hanger #7—left-hand panel hangs 7 ft. 6 in. from
Tormentor
left-hand door hangs 10 ft. from Proscenium Arch

"There are lots of tormenters around here," I said to the stagehand, "but what is a Tormentor?"

"That's the straight curtain that hangs across the front of the stage, framing the top of the scene," he was kind enough to explain. "It hides the scaffolding, and it can be raised or lowered as needed. And the Proscenium Arch is the great archway at the front of the stage."

"Thanks," I said. Helen was learning.

A copy of the Hanging Plot went to the man in the storehouse who had to dig out the proper scenery for each opera. He considered this superfluous, he informed me at once, since he had been at the Met so many years that he needed only to know the name of the opera to be sung in order to be in readiness for it. Nevertheless, he received his copy regularly. I was running no risks.

Having been through the torture of my first Hanging Plot I relaxed, but not for long. An electrician brought me the Electrical Plot of *Tristan und Isolde* to be revised and retyped. In it the whole lighting of the opera was worked out in detail. In my early years at the Met the lighting of the stage and auditorium was handled by twenty or more men stationed in different parts of the house, and each electrician must have his plot to follow. Now it is different—and easier.

When I had my first revised Electrical Plot ready I took it down to the stage and ran into a lighting rehearsal. Josef Urban was directing. Urban, while known to many people as a great scenic artist, was actually an architect, and preferred to be known as such. He designed the Ziegfeld Theatre and the New School for Social Research in New York. But he had a great passion for the theater and for color and was almost better known for his work in that field.

In the mid-Victorian age artists always used brown for shadows. Then in the early 'nineties when Urban was study-

ing in Vienna, a group of young artists, the "modernists" of that day, broke away from the traditional brown and used various colors for shadows and backgrounds. Urban loved blue, and experimented so much in this color that the blue he used most often came to be known as Urban blue, and was a kind of trademark.

Urban, as I watched his lighting rehearsals, would first of all call for a blue light on the scene. Then he would bring other colors into play until he had just the effect he desired. Always, as the curtain rose on the third act of *Aida*, there would be spontaneous applause from the audience for the beautiful blue moonlight shimmering on the Nile, transforming the old and drab setting into a magic scene.

So completely absorbed in his work that he had little use for anyone not directly concerned in achieving the effects he desired, Urban could be rude and demanding. He had no time at all for trivialities or small talk. He had expensive tastes and loved champagne. When the financial crash of the early 'thirties cut business and the theater to the quick, Urban would say: "As long as there is champagne for me, I'll be happy."

Returning to the first lighting rehearsal I saw, Urban called for a blue light, but a beautiful pink glow flooded the stage. Vociferous protests, many damn-it-to-hells, and a few quite unprintable epithets followed. Finally, the electrician achieved the desired effect and quiet reigned for a moment as the rehearsal went on. Then came another error and another eruption. To me it was as good as a play, and whenever duty or chance permitted I would take in a lighting rehearsal.

What astonished me, as long as the old system was in use, was the perfect performance turned in by the electricians when an opera was being sung. At rehearsals I often felt there would surely be a fiasco when curtain time came, but

in actual performance the Lighting Plot worked to perfection. Today an electrician sits at the modern switchboard, as at an organ, and plays the lights from his Plot by merely pressing buttons. Yet the good old days have a lot to be said for them. I watched some unforgettable settings come to life under Josef Urban's direction.

After the Electrical Plot I did a Property Plot. This listed all the furniture on stage for an opera: the rugs, hangings, chandelier, the cup to be used, and even the amount of liquid it would contain, and of what kind, and how the handkerchief was to be placed in a strategic position. Not an item was missed. After a time I knew by heart the setting, lighting, and hanging of each opera. Each scene became as familiar to me as my own sitting room. Helen of the Technical Department was beginning to feel quite at home.

Mr. Siedle started me on Time Schedules next. One had to be made up for each week of opera. *Il Trovatore* was to start our next week's performances.

"Find the schedule for the last performance of *Trovatore* and base your new one on that," Mr. Siedle directed me. "And check with the assistant stage-manager for any cuts or new business." All this I did, quite happy and carefree, little knowing then how treacherous such a schedule can be, or how many hundreds I would worry over in the future.

The Time Schedule showed the length of each act, the intermissions, and the exact time of the opening and closing curtains. This information is needed by some sixteen members of the staff each week. If the whole schedule is as much as a minute out of the way everybody crabs about it. The schedules became my *bête noire*. Once, later on, I had a really tough time. It was in the early days of broadcasting when John B. Kennedy was the noted commentator. The opera that Saturday afternoon was *Die Meistersinger*, with Artur Bodanzky conducting. At the last moment Bodanzky

decided to open a cut, reinstating a portion of the opera which had been cut previously in rehearsal. He forgot to notify me. With even a last minute warning I could have spread the word about, but Bodanzky happened to forget completely. Blissfully listening to the music over the radio in my office that afternoon I was suddenly aware of the extra passages coming through, and knew at once that I was lost! My whole beautiful Time Schedule for the matinee was off. Mr. Kennedy's prepared comments over the air had to be abruptly curtailed. His comments after the opera ended, when he complained to Mr. Ziegler, certainly could not have been broadcast. Everybody was peeved—of course it was all Helen's fault!

Bodanzky had a habit of changing his clothes quickly after a performance and rushing out of the building, so he was gone at once and I was there alone to face a different kind of music than that of the afternoon's opera.

Thereafter I tried to avert a similar accident by checking at the last moment, and while no repetition occurred, in the back of my mind for years was always the worry that it might happen again.

These Time Schedules have other uses too. The telephone operator and the box office each keep one on hand to answer innumerable questions. Seasoned operagoers often call up to ask when a certain favorite aria will be sung, and come for just that act.

"When does Lily Pons do the mad scene in *Lucia*?"

"I want to miss the death scene in today's opera; what time shall I come?"

"I'm having a dinner party and I want to arrive at my box just five minutes before curtain time for Act Two. What time will that be?"

"I've got to catch a train to Chicago. How much of the last act can I hear? I must be at the station at eleven-thirty."

The schedule helps to answer all sorts of questions like these. The men backstage rely on it too, to check if there is time to run out for a cup of coffee or a beer before the next scene must be struck. Yes, the Time Schedule is really an important item at the Met.

Toward the end of the winter season we began to be busy with the spring tour—another kind of Plot to plague me. Each separate item of baggage to go on tour had to be numbered and lists made and then I had innumerable pages to type. The wardrobe mistress and each dresser had to have a copy so that, at any given moment, the costume of each artist on tour could be located. Instead of enjoying a letdown at the end of the season we were busier than ever.

Fortunately, my plotting existence was interrupted by work that was less drudgery. One Saturday about a half hour before curtain time an emergency arose. The opera was *Fedora*, Scotti was to sing, and his costuming called for a pair of elegant white gloves. Frantic searching by Scotti's dresser and the stagehands failed to turn up the gloves in their usual place or any other. Macy's was the nearest store where we were sure of getting the right kind and size, and who but Helen of the Technical Department to charge the Saturday crowds at the glove counter and produce in record time a pair of white gloves to fit the famous baritone?

Like a hero of melodrama racing to the rescue I tore down Seventh Avenue, into Macy's, pushed my way to the front of the glove counter, made a hurried explanation and demand. Back to the Opera House with five minutes to spare! I'd added another bit of business to my growing list of duties and I felt quite the heroine of the afternoon.

The boys backstage were pleased with me because one of them had been saved a good tongue lashing for losing the gloves. Like my contretemps with the off-schedule of *Die Meistersinger*, which Bodanzky had created for me, the

stagehand responsible for placing the gloves swore that he had put them in their usual place. I believed him. Perhaps somebody wanted to play a practical joke on him, or perhaps a rival wanted to upset Scotti and throw him off key. Those things do happen in a three-ring opera house.

Another interlude came when Walter and I one day found our desks covered with filthy-looking helmets, those worn by the supers in *Aïda*. We were used to any kind of job being tossed our way. Walter, as the artist, began to plan the rejuvenation of the helmets and mixed the colors. Under his direction I helped to clean and repaint the tin hats, putting on the Egyptian blues and reds as directed. We did a good job, we felt, and sent the bright and new looking helmets back to the Property Department. While *Aïda* was being sung I could not resist going out front to admire my first handiwork parading around the stage.

Remembering stage properties makes me think of the old dragon in *Siegfried*. I always got a laugh out of him, and still do today. Two men had to operate the dragon, with whom Siegfried does battle in the second act, and who is finally slain by the hero. A property man named Gus, a big fellow, used to get into the head part and a little fellow named Davidson played the tail part. Even today when I hear Siegfried and see the dragon, I can only think with a chuckle of Gus and Davidson and the tomfoolery that went on inside the dragon as they played the part.

There was a bump in the middle of the dragon's neck which was Gus's head. One day during a performance of *Siegfried*, Rudolf Laubenthal, the Wagnerian tenor, was singing away, wrapped up in the music, and having an unusually spirited fight with the dragon. Laubenthal, as Siegfried, brandished his sword about, flashing it through the air, and then kept coming down smack! on the bump, time and again. Davidson told me later that Gus kept say-

ing: "God damn that Dutchman! God damn that Dutchman!" all through the fight, as he tried to duck the blows. Never had the poor old dragon had such a tenacious and mettlesome knight to face as on that particular day. When the scene was over, Gus emerged sore and bruised and lost no time in telling the "damn Dutchman" just what he thought of his performance.

The stage crew used to kid Gus and Davidson unmercifully, saying: "Wiggle your ears good tonight, Gus," and to Davidson: "Don't forget to wag your tail, boy." But I think they both enjoyed playing the role of the dragon.

Food on the stage of the Met can turn out to be anything. Champagne is usually ginger ale and usually flat at that. Tea and coffee are used for most other liquids, and steak, even twenty years ago when it was cheaper, was apt to be plain bologna. I wonder why composers like to put eating scenes into their work. Violetta has a brilliant party in her salon in *La Traviata* where champagne is imbibed freely. Don Giovanni throws a big to-do in his banquet hall where, as one libretto says, he "stuffs himself with a sumptuous dinner." In the attic scene of *Bohème* the artists have to be satisfied with "four stale rolls and a salt herring," washing it down with plain water. Then of course there is the famous supper scene in *Tosca*, with Scarpia enjoying his food while directing the torture of Cavaradossi, until Tosca fatally stabs him with the knife from his own table.

There is always coffee to be had backstage at the Met. It seems to me that I have never crossed the stage without bumping into one of the crew with a fresh pot of steaming coffee in his hand.

Walter Jagemann and I were once called on to make flames for *Der Freischütz*. We cut silk into pieces about the size of a dinner napkin, fireproofed them, dyed them in flame colors—deep yellows, blues, reds, and orange. Then

we carefully attached a small clip to each piece. The stagehands in the flies would release the pieces with the clips at the bottom, the electricians would play their lights upon them as they fell, and we had a very realistic reproduction of dancing colorful flames. Walter and I were delighted with ourselves. However, pride goeth before a fall, and we were no exception to that rule. Another bit of handiwork was less successful and nearly caused an incident. It certainly deflated our egos for a while.

We were told to make a new cozy for the breakfast scene at the beginning of *Der Rosenkavalier*. This was right up our alley. I stopped on my way to work the next morning—again at Macy’s—and picked out a very pretty china doll’s head. Walter made the framework and together we fashioned a handsome rose brocade dress for her. When the cozy was ready it was a delightful thing and we were pleased—as usual—and sent it down with a stagehand, asking him to put it over the pot from which the Marschallin gets her morning cup of chocolate.

At rehearsal time that afternoon we went down to the wings to see how the cozy looked on stage. Von Wymetal was directing the rehearsal and Jeritza was singing. She started the stage business with the pot, hesitated, fumbled with the cozy—as well as with a few notes. Von Wymetal ran across the stage, grabbed the cozy forcibly off the chocolate pot and threw it, yelling a tirade in German. The cozy—beautiful doll, dress, and frame—just missed Jeritza by an inch. There was fury all over the stage and Walter and I—cowards—faded away fast. We realized at once that we had not taken time to fit the cozy to the pot.

Up in our office we waited for the wrath of all the gods of Valhalla to descend upon us, but nothing happened. We took courage and crept downstairs again to hear Jeritza

singing as well as ever and Von Wymetal nodding in pleased fashion. We were safe, but it was a lesson to us!

After the rehearsal was over we redeemed the cozy and refashioned it, making sure that it slipped on and off easily. I believe the same pot and cozy are still used at the Met.

CHAPTER 4

MASTERS OF ALL THEY SURVEY

*M*Y friend Fred Hosli, master mechanic and chief of the stagehands, was a regular guy, so said all the men who worked with him, and the rest of us agreed. He never kow-towed to the artists, never leaped forward to give them unnecessary assistance, nor did he applaud them as they passed by after having finished an aria. Yet all the singers liked him. He was tsar of the stage, knew each piece of scenery like his ABC's, and could direct his helpers with authority and decision. He had almost a mania for playing the horses. But he never let it interfere with the business of opera: the curtain always went up on time.

Late rehearsals or matinees would often hold up preparations for an evening performance and Freddie and his crews would work like madmen to strike the first scene, but curtain time found everything in readiness. Fred Hosli enjoyed an unusual kind of loyalty, devotion, and protection from his men. They liked him and recognized his abilities, as we all did.

Freddie never complained about extra work or sudden changes. When I had to dash down to the stage, the bearer of last minute orders, I never had to fear that he might go

temperamental on me and blow his top. He took extra work and trouble and pressure of time all in his stride.

One day Fred Hosli was found badly injured from a fall, and within a week he was dead. His men and others of the Met family truly mourned him. He deserves remembrance: he was an old-time worker who really loved his job.

Another of my friends from way-back-when days was, and I am happy to say still is, the chief electrician at the Met, Jacob Buchter, better known to all of us as Jake. Mr. Buchter to me was different from other heads of departments in that he looked like a business executive from a Wall Street office. Always well dressed, his business suits and well-chosen ties made him distinctive, especially among the other heads who worked in slack clothes or uniforms. Jake was the artist in lighting who directed from out front, working with famous scenic designers such as Josef Urban.

Every single item of lighting in the whole Opera House was Jake's responsibility. It was an art, and it required great technical knowledge to plan and control the lighting system in the old days before the central switchboard simplified the task. Jake was a master of his particular art. It was for him and his crew that I typed the thousands of Lighting Plots during my years at the Met.

There was a time, early in my career, when Jake and I considered ourselves as good as the first-string music critics in New York! I loved to listen in on auditions and Jake had to be on hand to light the stage for the ever hopeful singers who were trying out for their cherished goal. The auditions were held at off-intervals as they naturally could not be allowed to interfere with either rehearsals or performances. Usually the hours were between five and seven in the early winter evenings.

After my day in the Technical Department I would fly down to the wings and Jake and I would munch candy,

which he thoughtfully provided, and we would listen to the aspirants. We gave each one full and due consideration; discussed their good and poor points, and rendered a verdict. We got to be quite expert at picking the winners. This turned out to be good training for me, and in later years Mr. Ziegler often called me down to the auditorium to act as a kind of guinea pig, using me for audience reaction.

The Buchters had a summer home at Rocky Point, Long Island, and I, after my marriage, had a home at nearby Wading River, so that we were neighbors as well as co-workers. Jake had married one of the more talented members of the Met Ballet. Mrs. Buchter was a good artist in water color and oils as well as on her toes. They were a fine artistic family to know and to remember.

Philip Crispano was our Master of Properties. He also occasionally served as interpreter for Gatti-Casazza, as he was able to converse fluently in both English and Italian. When Mr. Siedle had decided upon the type and form and color of properties to be used in a scene, Philip Crispano built the furniture to scale, doing beautiful and expert work. Phil also provided, and had at hand for each opera, any article to be carried on stage and any food to be used in a scene.

His too was the curious but often pleasant task of being on hand when an opera called for any sort of acrobatic action on the part of an artist, or when fair singers needed a helping hand. For instance, when Jeritza leaped from the prison wall in the final scene of *Tosca*, presumably to her death, she actually landed upon a mattress on the floor just under the wall. Phil had to be there to help her to her feet and see that she did not injure herself. He helped Brünnhilde on and off her heavenly steed Grane, in *Götterdämmerung*; Juliet up and down to and from the balcony; and all the prima donnas at final curtains to their feet again after they had "sunk lifelessly" to the floor in death scenes in at

least every other opera. Phil enjoyed these duties so much that he never would relegate them to anyone else. He was well known to many of the stars and took great pride in these associations.

Philip Crispano's daughter-in-law, known professionally as Ethel Fox, had a wonderfully fine soprano voice and it was a mystery to me at that time why she never made the Met. By and by I realized and understood why, though I never ceased to rebel against the fact. It is often all too true that a lesser voice with *important* connections is hired, while a finer voice must struggle far harder to attain recognition, with merit alone as recommendation.

Each week a rather stocky young man of medium height, always smoking a cigar, would barge into Mr. Ziegler's office, loaded down with ledgers, memorandums, and accounts. This was Aimé Gerber, our payroll master. Almost before he had a chance to seat himself, Mr. Ziegler would ask: "Well, Aimé, what's the difference?" This would be the difference between the present week's payroll and that of the payroll of the same week of the previous year.

Being prepared for this regular questioning, Aimé would be ready with his statistics and his answers. "It's more," he'd say, "but you remember that we had five minutes over with the rehearsal of *Lohengrin*, and an extra rehearsal of *Tristan*."

"Humph!" Mr. Ziegler would grunt in dissatisfaction. Privately, Aimé would say to me: "God! We're like a canning factory—have to produce just so much a week!"

Aimé Gerber dabbled with opera on his own. He would take light opera companies to Atlanta, Georgia, in the spring or summer. I assisted him too with his contracts, making out costs, and with correspondence. I remember that it was while helping him with this work that I first heard the name

of Irene Dunne. She sang in one of Gerber's companies in the days before she entered the movies.

Gerber would have been a good actor—he never told a story without acting it out. At the Met we felt that he had missed his vocation, that he ought to have gone on the stage instead of toiling over the thankless job of payrolls. He would relate so many experiences to us, acting each out in dramatic or ludicrous fashion, that we never knew which to believe, which to doubt. But he had some wild ones that we accepted as coming from his vivid imagination. One day he had me all ears listening to a recital of a fishing trip along the Jersey shore which he said he had taken. But when he came to the part where the over-sized fish jumped out of the water and practically ran up the beach after his hook, Helen knew *she* had been hooked with that one!

Aimé Gerber came to the Met as a very young boy, and after being there about fifty years, retired as paymaster. But how hard it is to leave the halls of Valhalla! Aimé Gerber is now at the Fortieth Street door, taking tickets for performances. He always said he would live to be a hundred and four—an arbitrary conclusion. I am beginning to think that he may be right, for he seems to have perpetual youth. Vive Gerber and his tall tales!

Another of the distinguished looking figures who took tickets at the Met, at the main or Broadway entrance for evening performances, was Hugh Brown, of Scottish ancestry, whose real job was that of building superintendent. It always amused me greatly to think that in his early youth Mr. Brown had been a six-day bicycle rider. I felt that he must have had some fancy pedaling to do to get from the bicycle track to the Metropolitan Opera House as superintendent in charge of the whole big place.

The problems the old building presented were many and at times of major concern, for everything was old and worn

out with the years. The plumbing especially was unpredictable. To keep the Opera House in repair and as clean as possible, with a limited staff to do it, required ingenuity and skill. (Now that I stop to think of it, a bicycle racer may have to have just those qualities to win races!)

Anything might happen in a day at the Met and Mr. Brown would have to be prepared to meet it—anything from a bad leak and a falling ceiling to a cornice smashing to the street from the top of the building, as one did one day in a high wind. When he had a chance, Hugh Brown would relax for a moment in our meeting room in the Technical Department, but usually he was soon called away.

Mr. Brown had the mean task of battling with the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Board over questions of necessary major repairs. During the time when the Real Estate Board owned the building, the Met had a tough time of it getting them to do a big repair job, necessary though it always was. Considering the limitations of the old building, Mr. Brown did an exceptionally fine job throughout his long superintendency. Hugh Brown has retired now, but often comes back to the Met to say hello, and he looks, at eighty years of age, as if he had drunk of the fountain of youth. Association with the Met for long years seems to produce a lively old age.

Another old friend of mine, still at the Met, is Arthur Weidhaas. He used to be connected with the Metropolitan Opera Real Estate Board. During those years I never ran into him except at matinees and evening performances when he would stand guard at the lounge on the parterre floor, where the real estate men had their own club rooms. He seemed to be guarding their interests.

Arthur informed me once that his mother had told him that he had been born laughing, and he had continued to be a cheery soul. When the Metropolitan Opera Associa-

tion took over the building from the real estate company, the latter was disbanded, and Arthur came into the box office and has been there for some dozen years in charge of subscriptions. He knows all the socialites in town because of his past connection with the real estate board, and this knowledge is of use in the box office.

It had been Arthur's intention to become a minister and he had started his studies, but his contact with the Opera House swayed him, and he decided to stay at the Met. However, Arthur settles any discussion about creeds for the box office staff. He works surrounded by five females—a position requiring diplomacy! No matter how involved and upset the staff may get over the pressure of work or the difficulty of pleasing subscribers, or trying to find a seat for an important personage when none is available, Arthur's eyes will start twinkling, he manages to see a bit of humor somewhere, and soon everybody is in good spirits again.

When I used to go through the Wardrobe Department it was always, to me, like a little trip through fairyland. Beautiful costumes of all periods and styles, in every lovely color, were hung in closets around the room, row after row. They were made of gorgeous materials: soft velvets, magnificent brocades, shimmering silks, floating tulles, and many were embroidered in diamanté and jewels. Experienced sewers at the machines (later electrified) were busily stitching away on other lovely costumes, and the worktables were draped with more stunning material. How I delighted in feasting my eyes on all that lovely stuff and in touching it caressingly.

The costumes for the Met used to be made from sketches originating in the Technical Department, or from private designers or scenic artists. Some of the artists of course had their own personal designers and modistes, but the majority

availed themselves of the services of the Met Wardrobe Department.

When I first came to the Met Madame Pangoni was head of the Wardrobe Department but she left when Herbert Witherspoon came in as the new general manager. Pangoni had the able assistance of Jennie Cervini, who was then made the wardrobe mistress, and who has been for years now the indispensable "Jennie of the Met." After directing her department all day, Jennie at night will act as dresser for the top star singing that evening's performance. If the star has her own personal maid Jennie will still be on hand to see that the costume is donned properly and that everything is perfection before the singer steps on the stage.

The Wardrobe Department is always busy making up and fitting new costumes, repairing and refurbishing old ones. The wardrobe women must pack for the spring tour and the important dressers must go on tour with the artists. After each performance all costumes used in the opera are sent to the cleaners unless the gowns are the personal property of the star, in which case her maid takes charge of them. It can readily be understood why the costumes are made from the best materials, since they must stand up under constant cleaning. No one is ever supposed to wear a gown that has not been dry-cleaned.

It used to be my job to prepare the lists of costumes for the Wardrobe Department to take on tour. Nowadays the department must take care of that problem itself. When I see any of the personnel of the department these days, they are sure to say: "Oh, Helen, *how* we miss you—we wish we had your lists today."

CHAPTER 5

WHO SAID "LION'S DEN"?

THE first Christmas I spent at the Met was, to my surprise, highly gratifying. As I was the only female member of the Technical Department everyone remembered me in one way or another. I got pounds and pounds of candy, nuts, candied fruits—flowers and Christmas plants. There were five handbags as I remember, dozens and dozens of handkerchiefs—finely embroidered ones and sturdier sport handkerchiefs, all colors and all sizes. And scents—perfume, toilet water, cologne, of every kind in assorted sizes and fancy containers. My greatest thrill was my first bottle of "Christmas Night," a huge bottle from Fred Hosli.

Soon after New Year's, a message came over the phone for Helen to come immediately to Mr. Ziegler's office to help out. I was terrified and looked around for a knight in armor. No Lohengrin appeared and all Walter could do was to clasp his hands in the air, as an appeal to heaven for me. I picked up my pencils and book and started, and my dread of what was before me made me forget my usual fear of the Paint Bridge. I was across without thinking and knocking on Mr. Ziegler's door.

Besides the episode with Mr. Siedle which I had witnessed soon after coming to the Met, I was aware of many

stories about the assistant manager. He was cold, he was shrewd, he was blunt, he had no heart. No wonder I kept out of his way! But now, I said to myself, the time has come—you've got to enter the lion's den.

As soon as I knocked a voice said: "Come in." With outward composure in I went to face a pleasant smile and a kindly "Good morning, child."

So great was my reaction that the bubble of fear burst, and never again in my years of association was I ever to be afraid of my Boss. Mr. Ziegler stood up most politely, set a chair, and made me feel quite at ease.

Now I wondered why anyone feared him as they did and hesitated to make a simple request. Later on I was always asking favors for others. People would come to me and say: "You ask him, Helen, you're not afraid of him." I never had any reason to be. I came to understand the protective business armor he had to wear. He was so completely and utterly devoted to the Opera House, to the task of keeping it alive, a lasting contribution to the arts, that he looked with deep disfavor on all the small items of expense that could easily have rolled into a disastrous sum. He fought each single item as if it were the one likely to lead to a collapse of the budget. It was his job to keep the Met a going concern. Whether he pleased individuals or not never interested him.

During the next two weeks Mr. Ziegler called for me several times. He had a man secretary but he would be in one day, absent the next, and eventually he just faded away. One morning, Mr. Ziegler, a great economist as I have suggested, said: "Do you think, child, that you could handle the work here and still carry on the technical work?"

In my frank way I answered without stopping to be subtle: "I probably could, but I'm not sure that I want to work for you."

Mr. Ziegler, with his sense of humor and conscious of my immaturity, said with a smile: "Well, maybe I won't like working with you, either, but let's give it a trial and see if we like each other." The word trial was never mentioned again; I just stayed on.

With this arrangement it meant that I was working for three departments in the Opera House: the entire Technical Department as usual, certain work for the treasurer, and now the Executive Department. I was to work late nights, often on Sundays, on holidays too. What a help it was to be young and in excellent health, and what marvelous experience to be learning the opera business in every phase! No overtime was paid to me then, nor did I get a large salary, but then I neither asked for an increase nor complained. I too loved the Opera House.

Just before all this happened, Mr. Siedle had been ill at home. After a few weeks he passed away. We were shocked by his death, for while we had been aware that he was not in the best of health, yet he had been in his sanctum every day until the last couple of weeks, and none of us had any idea that he was so near the end of life. From Mr. Gatti-Casazza down we all attended his funeral at the Masonic Hall in West Twenty-third Street. The Masonic Quartet sang *The Long Day Closes*—that is the principal thing I remember about the funeral.

With Mr. Siedle gone, Walter Jagemann took over under Mr. Ziegler's supervision.

Within a day of Mr. Ziegler's "trial offer" I had moved across to the Thirty-ninth Street side into a two-room suite of offices! They were on the second floor at the Seventh Avenue corner, right above Mr. Gatti's office. Mr. Ziegler's office was below too, next to Gatti's.

The stagehands and technicians kidded me about moving across. "Going high-hat, eh?" they said. But they were

really pleased, knowing I would be their friend at court. It was strange that there should be such definite differences between the two sides of the Opera House, especially when, as a whole, a deep family feeling existed.

The Met was a second home to all of us. It was a dominating interest which drew us together. Often there were quarrels, jealousies, and backbiting; but illness or trouble for anyone brought ready sympathy and help from all. The family ranks closed quickly for protection and defense. This bond of unity was remarkable in that we had a dozen different nationalities, all kinds of workers, all types of people on the staff. Another thing helped to cement this feeling of belonging: workers stayed at the Met for years and years and grew to be close friends. They stayed, many of them, until they died on the job. The interesting and exciting world within the Opera House made it hard for us to break away.

As Mr. Ziegler's secretary I was now dealing with members of the Board of Directors, with artists and their representatives, seeing callers, and acting as a buffer on the telephone for my Boss. Gone were the carefree happy days in the Technical Department.

More often now I heard myself called Miss Klaffky (my maiden name) instead of just Helen. Klaffky was a difficult name for many to remember though the foreign artists picked it up readily. My family had been in America long enough for us to think of ourselves only as Americans. Walter Damrosch told me that the name undoubtedly had been Klafsky, Polish in origin, and that he had known a great singer by that name. Somewhere in the past, Dr. Damrosch used to insist, the European s had become another f. However it may be, I have never run across a similar name. Later on, when Schumann-Heink wrote her memoirs, she praised a certain Katharina Klafsky as the

greatest Isolde ever. Perhaps the musical interests characteristic of my family come that way.

My Boss had an unusual combination of fine executive ability and artistic appreciation and understanding. He spoke German and English equally well. His school French he brushed up after he came to the Met and became fluent enough to handle business and get along well when he travelled. He learned Italian only after he came to the Met but attained considerable fluency. His linguistic abilities were a tremendous help in making up contracts with foreign artists. Besides music he had an equal knowledge of the other arts: painting, sculpture, literature. Often when beset by problems he would slip away to a museum, relax with one of his favorite paintings, and return refreshed for the battle.

Before coming to the Met Mr. Ziegler had been music critic on the famous *New York Herald*. It was while he was working on the *Herald* that he met Otto H. Kahn, well-known international banker, and a man who was tremendously interested in the theater in all its branches. Mr. Kahn had been for a great many years—not investing—but plain sinking money into a great many theatrical adventures. Perhaps he had been “burned” a bit once or twice—I really wouldn’t know—but it is logical to believe that this may have happened. At all events he met Ziegler, liked him, and asked him if he would undertake to look after his interests in these various enterprises. Mr. Ziegler took over and Mr. Kahn seemed to be very pleased. I don’t know whether Mr. Kahn came out ahead of the game, or broke even. But Mr. Ziegler apparently was a great help to him, particularly in the days when the Diaghilev Ballet was performing here, and also later when Morris Gest brought the Max Reinhardt spectacle, *The Miracle*, to New York. Mr. Kahn then proceeded to try to interest Mr. Ziegler in

coming to the Met as administrative secretary. The Met too, thought Mr. Kahn, could stand a good man of Ziegler's abilities.

I understand that Mr. Ziegler's family found it rather strange to see their music critic becoming an economist. But when it is possible to find the combination (and Mr. Kahn deserves credit for his ability in picking men) it is a very fine asset for an organization such as the Met. I believe it was five years from the time Mr. Kahn first broached the subject to Mr. Ziegler to the day when he finally said goodbye to the *Herald* and made the transition into the Met family. (I have heard that the old Fifth Avenue Bank at 530 Fifth Avenue made several offers to Ziegler to come with them.) He moved into the Met, and immediately began to learn everything about the place from the boiler room to the roof stage. As he was an excellent student, with the facility of learning rapidly, and also a meticulous worker, he soon had complete control of the place.

In my Boss, business acumen and his artistic temperament often were in conflict, but whatever was best for the Met always won out. He watched everything. All union crews received overtime pay, and the penalty for sloppy timing could be staggering. If the orchestra was called at a certain time for a two- or three-hour rehearsal—well that was it. And usually they got everything finished in the time allowed. If a stage band was called for a certain rehearsal, come hell or high water they began their rehearsals at the time they were called. Time was always a bugaboo at the Met, sending expenses soaring whenever there was an extra-long performance, any unexpected delays, or long rehearsals, and Mr. Ziegler always believed these things could be carefully watched and controlled. I have often heard it said that "Hollywood is crazy"; that people there are called for rehearsals and then sit around for hours, and so on.

Hollywood has plenty of money for this but Mr. Ziegler, realizing the public's share in the Met, never for one moment wanted to waste money. There was very little unnecessary sitting around in Mr. Ziegler's time; everyone knew he meant business and they adjusted their business to his demands.

Mr. Ziegler did all the contract work for the Met, dealing with union representatives, handling all the business matters of the company, such as contracts with the National Broadcasting Company, leases for the scenery storehouses, all the various insurance policies, or matters pertaining to the road tours—a thousand and one things, to say nothing of assisting Gatti in the making of contracts with the artists. He had one great asset: he never lost his dignity in dealing with people and this gave him the upper hand on many occasions. It also brought him the reputation of being cold and heartless, which he was not.

Mr. Ziegler's sense of humor I came up against almost immediately. He had heard a story the night before and told it with great detail and relish. The gist of it was that a railroad had been receiving complaints from passengers who had found nonpaying riders in their berths. The writers made demands and threats, and when this happened the railroad official just directed his secretary to send the "bed-bug" letter back to them.

Thereupon Mr. Ziegler dictated to me several form letters which we called Bedbug Letter No. 1, No. 2, and so on. These were to answer several common complaints of our own at the Met. After that, when answering the morning's mail there would be notations such as BB No. 1, or BB No. 2, on any complaint letters. It was a standing joke between us.

At the Opera House two complaints outnumbered all the rest. The first was from subscribers who protested loudly that their particular subscription night did not have

as good a repertoire as another. They were not getting an equal number of top operas and artists. Mr. Ziegler's letter regretted that the subscriber was dissatisfied, asked him, or her, to realize that the business of repertoire making was most complicated and difficult (and indeed it is) and assured him that the best for everyone had really been assayed.

Another complaint demanded that late-comers be held in the foyer until the end of the first scene. We replied, in BB No. 2, that this had been tried and had proved unworkable. Preventing ticketholders from entering had provoked so many disputes that the noise disturbed the audience much more than did the stragglers coming in late. The idea had been quite decisively shelved. As Mr. Ziegler said, the audience too can be temperamental.

The standees at the top of the house are the best-mannered of operagoers. They are on time, quiet, absorbed, appreciative. Many of them know the opera scores as well as do the musicians and singers. They are there purely because of their love of opera.

Here is as good a place as any to mention the *claque* at the Met. At first I accepted it simply because it was an old custom. Later I grew to feel that the *claque* was a necessary adjunct. The hired applauders start the clapping at the proper moment. The applause grows in volume because of the audience reaction, and will be as enthusiastic as the audience itself feels. The paid clappers do not make or break a singer. (That's the critic's prerogative.) But they do keep the beginning of the applause from being ragged and scattered. What artist, finishing a big aria, does not need applause, immediate and warm? The *claque* is not authorized by the Met—it is a kind of lobby supported by contributions from the singers. Another thing to remember: all the members of the *claque* are music lovers, well versed in opera,

and have their own enthusiasm for fine performances. On the whole I'd vote to continue the claque.

My new offices were surrounded by the male artists' dressing rooms, also used as rehearsal rooms. Often I learned to know the artists by their voices before becoming acquainted with them. In one way it was very nice to be so near, but at times it was a handicap. The basso Ludwig Hofmann, for instance, used to vocalize while accompanying himself with one finger, the piano going plunk, plunk, plunk. One day he banged on my wall and said: "That noise must stop, I can't sing, I can't concentrate, I must do my work."

"What noise? I am not doing anything but *my* work," I replied.

Whereupon he again yelled at me: "Stop that dam tick, tick, tick! I must think! I cannot think with that tick, tick, tick!"

"Well," said I, "you're bothering me too, I can't do any work with you singing *ah, ah, ah* in there all the time."

He won out, however. I had to stop my work and let him *ah, ah, ah* to his heart's content.

Besides getting to know the male artists by their voices, I could sometimes tell who was passing by in the hall by the favorite lotion or perfume used.

"Is Emanuel List in as yet?" Mr. Ziegler would ask me. "I haven't seen him as yet, but I know he is here. I can smell him," I would reply. Emanuel List, our most delightful Baron Ochs in *Der Rosenkavalier* was always heavily saturated with a special perfume—I never knew the particular brand.

The conductors' room was nearby, too, where they changed into white tie and tails and went down to the pit looking starched and alert for the performance, from which they returned like wet dishrags. Bodanzky, as I have men-

tioned, changed quickly and fled after a performance, to escape the crowd of well-wishers. Serafin was the slowest. In fact we nicknamed him Dead-Slow-And-Stop. So many of us had bumped into him when walking along behind him in the corridors.

Mr. Ziegler asked me one day to share one of my rooms with the orchestra manager, space at the Met being so limited. Of course I did and Anthony Abarno moved in, and after he left, Simon Mantia. They were good companions, and except for making out the orchestra contracts for them once a year, I had very little to do with them, as they were down at rehearsals most of the time.

When Mr. Lee Pattison came to direct the first spring season at the Met he took over an office next to mine and I did his secretarial work too, the Met being short of money that year—perhaps I should say, the Met being unusually short of money that year. Mr. Pattison, taking note of the many jobs I held down, called me the Melting Pot. Anyway, from the beginning I had fun in Mr. Ziegler's office.

CHAPTER 6

THE KING AND THE CROWN PRINCE

*E*ACH morning Mr. Ziegler had a regular routine. He would come in around ten o'clock, say "Good morning, child," get a glass of water and put in a pill, wait for it to dissolve, and then drink it down. (I never knew what kind of pill or what it was for. Mr. Z. never told me and I did not ask!)

Then he would sit down, pick up the phone and call Mrs. Ziegler. He left the house sometimes before she was awake so he would say, "Good morning, dear." He would tell her about the day's weather, how warmly to dress when she went out, would suggest a certain museum to visit and a picture to see. Or else ask her to drop into the Opera House for a special rehearsal. Then they would discuss the evening meal. Oysters and steak were most frequently mentioned, as Mr. Ziegler was particularly fond of them. He'd ask: "Anything I can do for you, dear?" and after an affectionate farewell would hang up. To me this was wonderful, and I felt that he was an ideal husband, considerate, kind, thoughtful. Every other day he ordered flowers for Mrs. Ziegler and was particularly happy if he could get white lilacs, a favorite flower.

After these events we had another regular morning occurrence: Mr. Gatti-Casazza arrived. He came in a little later than Mr. Ziegler, looked over his mail, and then came into Mr. Ziegler's office. Gatti would call out a "good morning" in Italian, stride over to the one comfortable chair in the room, fling himself into it, and throw one leg over the arm of the chair. He would loll way back and start talking in Italian, very fast, to my Boss.

They might readily have been following through on a conversation of the night before. They had a habit, after an evening performance, of taking a cab and riding all over town—through the park, up and down Fifth Avenue, along Riverside Drive—anywhere the driver took them. They would blow off steam about any poor singing of the evening, about a fit of temperament that had been pulled by a star, about some annoyance of the day, or current difficulties with the theater unions. Or perhaps it was some future plans that needed discussion and clarifying. Unless the cab driver were an Italian, he probably wondered what in hell was going on. At any rate, he never had any complaint about the size of his fare or his tip.

When they finally gave the driver the address of the passenger nearest home, some new thought or idea might occur, and it happened often that they would drive back and forth between Gatti's door and Ziegler's, until the need for sleep finally ended the evening's trek all over town.

The first morning that I was present when Gatti came into Mr. Ziegler's office and threw himself into his favorite position, I was horrified to see the top button of his trousers pop open. (It was in the days before zippers.) Mr. Ziegler caught my glance and embarrassment and said in English, with a grin, "Don't worry, it never goes any farther." And sure enough it never did. Morning after morning, year after year, that first button always popped, but never the second.

My very first day with Mr. Ziegler brought me some good advice and I followed it faithfully all the years I was his secretary. To it I credit the fact that I got on so well for so long in such a highstrung, blood-pressure-raising atmosphere as that of the Met most of the time.

Mr. Ziegler said to me: "Child, if you will follow the piece of advice I am now about to give you, you will save yourself and me much trouble and unhappiness. You know about the three little monkeys? Well, emulate them. Whatever you happen to see, see nothing. Be deaf to what you hear. Say as little as possible when you find yourself being queried. Then we'll get along fine."

The symbol of the three little monkeys often came to my mind later and I was grateful to my Boss for having planted it there. However, he forgot to tell me that on occasion it was pretty difficult to be around the place and ignore startling sights, loud sounds—and very distinct odors!

Mr. Ziegler's office was the battleground, often referred to as the Torture Chamber. There all contracts between the Met and the artists, initiated with Mr. Gatti, were discussed, fought over, finally signed. All the union contracts were within Mr. Ziegler's province too, and the final settlement and signing were preceded by violent debates and turbulent arguments. The daily difficulties between the personnel were settled there also. Mr. Ziegler was the final arbiter on all problems presented by conductors, assistant conductors, stage managers, assistant stage managers, heads of departments—all down the line. Nearly everybody who came in had a row to hoe, a bone to pick, or a nest to feather. Otherwise they stayed away. This was so different from my office over in Tech where people were in and out constantly with a cheery hello. It was good sometimes to have work that took me back over there to see Walter and Tommy and to catch up with my old friends.

Constant battling went on with the artists and their managers who wanted to be able to accept outside concert dates for their singers during the opera season. Since the stars received more money for a concert than for an opera performance, it was understandable that they wished to take advantage of every concert possible. But to ask to have their opera performance dates changed—that was a signal for battle.

When a singer is under contract to the Met the opera must have first claim, and the artist, of course, knows this. Yet the effort will often be made to wrangle a concert date by adjusting an opera commitment. Mr. Ziegler was adamant on these occasions, which made him heartily disliked by those of the singers and their personal managers who failed to achieve their objectives. Mr. Ziegler was able to take this dislike with equanimity and I never knew him to be vindictive. Often after such a set-to I would meet the artist in question the next day and would be asked: "How is your cranky old so-and-so today?" I could truthfully answer: "Why, just fine, and sends his love."

On the other hand, Mr. Ziegler often, quietly, tried to make an artist's concert date possible. If he succeeded the singer would be delighted. If not, nothing would be said about the try and the artist would be unaware that Mr. Ziegler had made the effort. One thing about the whole business of outside dates helped greatly: when my Boss made a decision it was final. This saved a lot of unnecessary extra battling, for the singers and managers learned through experience to accept this fact.

I do know that my Boss sometimes ran a risk in allowing a singer to accept an outside date that was dangerously close to his or her opera performance. Mr. Ziegler would never incur any additional or unnecessary expense that could possibly be avoided. Therefore, he would not engage

a replacement for the opera, to stand by just in case failure of transportation, or some other unforeseen emergency might make it impossible for the scheduled singer to reach the Opera House in time. He preferred to take a chance and save money for the Met. I do not recall any slip-up ever occurring, but Mr. Ziegler was always on the alert until the artist was safely back in town the day of the opera performance.

Since the Met had at this time seventy to eighty artists engaged each season, the problem of outside concert dates was a colossal one and an eternal headache. It was Mr. Ziegler's responsibility to keep each performance covered. Yet some of the stars, or more especially their managers, would suggest that he was deliberately denying them an opportunity to make money. To deal with the matter of outside dates was an unenviable job and it took a man of Mr. Ziegler's fortitude to do it successfully.

When my Boss admired an artist, he liked to joke and kid with him, or with her, saying, "My God, have we got to listen to *you* tonight!" or, "Sorry, but I *must* sit up with a sick friend tonight." With those he cared least about he would be reserved and businesslike at all times, never showing his human side.

We had one young second singer he was fond of, even though she was often evasive when questioned about anything. We never got straight answers from her and when they finally came along, it was always a maybe or a non-committal answer. At the end of the season the artist married and in due time had a baby.

"Well," said Mr. Ziegler to me, "evidently she said yes to someone."

He waited until I learned the baby's name and then sent a telegram addressed to the newcomer: *Congratulations, Thomas, does your mother know you're out?*

Mr. Ziegler had a letter one day from the vice-president of a famous piano concern. The company wanted a testimonial from him which was to be printed in programs, something about the superiority of tone, they suggested.

"Better black and white tones than anyone else's?" asked Mr. Z. of me as I relayed the message. "No, thanks," he continued, "I do not want to be raised to the heights of Parnassus on the legs of a piano." Mr. Ziegler had an aversion to being in the limelight. He felt that Gatti-Casazza was the big name at the Opera House and he was content to have it so.

Mr. Ziegler had many important friends and was doing a tremendous job at the Met, and could readily have had the spotlight on himself time and again had he so wished. Mr. Otto Kahn, for instance, was one of his best friends. Mr. Kahn was a well-known and important citizen of New York and his name and his activities were continually mentioned in the daily press. Associated with the great international banking firm of Kuhn, Loeb & Company, his large fortune enabled him to be a patron of the arts. The theater, music, and painting enjoyed Mr. Kahn's liberal patronage and support, as I have said. But for the opera he had an almost fanatical love. The Metropolitan Opera House benefited by this passion of his.

Mr. Kahn kept in *daily* contact with the Opera House, wanting to know about everything that was happening. We all liked to deal with him, for he was pleasant and friendly, never high-hat or snobbish. The porters and doormen loved him. His generosity at holiday times, or for any special favor, was a byword. He often would come to the Met to have dinner with Mr. Ziegler, and later on would attend the evening's performance. The two men would have a wonderful time at dinner, eating ham and eggs with green peas, and *apfelstrudel* for dessert, with plenty of good

coffee. Their second choice was always broiled chicken. I would have to phone Mr. Kahn's secretary, Miss Mutke, during the afternoon, and ask which it was to be: ham and eggs or chicken, and if eggs, how they were to be prepared.

These dinners were like picnics to the two men. The meal was brought in by Emil Katz, who then had the catering concession at the Met. After the trays had arrived and Emil had departed, no one was permitted to disturb them. They could discuss everything and everybody freely. Once when Mr. Ziegler called me in for something, I found them eating the chicken with their fingers, greasy and happy, and laughing like youngsters. My Boss saved his best clubroom stories for these picnic dinners and they must have been humdingers, for he had a wonderful store of them and always told them exceptionally well.

Mr. Clarence Mackay would often send game too. Mr. Ziegler would tell me just how it was to be prepared, cooked, and served. It made my mouth water. The information stood me in good stead, for after my marriage I found that my husband loved game and I had to prepare it often for him.

There were many other famous men with whom my Boss enjoyed fine and lasting friendships, but always quietly and unobtrusively. He shied away from publicity, always preferring to stay in the background. In that way he felt he could get things done better.

From 1908 to 1935 Giulio Gatti-Casazza, or Gatti as he was more familiarly known to us, was the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera Company. (In 1931 the name was changed to the Metropolitan Opera Association.) Gatti was a true impresario in every way: his musical appreciation was outstanding, he was tops in the production of grand

opera, and in appearance he perfectly portrayed the word "impresario." He was imposing in height and build and manner, with a trim beard which made his handsome face more distinguished. He was also a scholar and artists and staff alike respected his great abilities and liked him personally.

Gatti had twenty-seven years of high achievement at the Met. He presented many great singers and great conductors, with Toscanini, of course, first among them, and also Serafin, Bodanzky, Monteux, and Bellezza. Among the singers I remember were Farrar, Alda, Bori, Jeritza, Titta Ruffo, Chaliapin, Hempel, Branzell, Gigli, Thorborg, DeLuca, Rethberg, Pons, Pinza, Martinelli, Scotti, Schorr, Rosa Ponselle, John Charles Thomas, Edward Johnson, Richard Crooks, Lawrence Tibbett, Grace Moore, and Kirsten Flagstad, who came to the Met just before Gatti resigned in 1935. Caruso and many other great names preceded these. *What a roster of stars!* With such a plenitude of magnificent voices and conductors under contract, with Gatti's inspired musical management, and with Ziegler in the background working hand in hand with Gatti, the wonderful old Met could hardly help but soar in the production of truly grand grand opera.

Mr. Ziegler, I feel, had a goodly share in these accomplishments since, as assistant general manager and business administrator, he relieved Gatti of all boresome and bothersome details. They worked harmoniously together, were close friends, and extremely *simpatico* to each other. Grand Opera was their mistress and they served her with utter devotion and single purpose. They were Knights of the Golden Horseshoe.

Something over six feet in height, Gatti was well built, with a distinguished face and beautiful brown eyes of unusual depth that missed nothing, and a pleasant, rather deep-

speaking voice. He was well educated and intelligent, reserved but courteous in manner. These assets would surely have made Gatti-Casazza a success and a personality in any profession. He was a graduate marine engineer but fortunately for grand opera had been drafted to assist his father with the community opera theater in Ferrara, Italy. From there he was called to La Scala, then the fountainhead of opera houses, and finally to our own Metropolitan Opera House.

Gatti always greeted us courteously as we passed by him. He had a habit of walking with a deliberate pace, never hurried, yet always as though he had a definite object in mind. Invariably his two thumbs would be hooked under his vest, while his fingers played a concerto on his chest. When we met he would say a friendly "*Buon giorno*," and give a saluting gesture of fingers withdrawn from vest to the forehead with an outward flip of the hand. He had a sense of humor that I became aware of shortly after I had begun to work for Mr. Ziegler.

I happened to meet him in a hallway and we passed two second singers who were standing together talking loudly, each trying to outdo the other in telling of the number of curtain calls received on their respective tours just ended. Gatti saluted them and after we had passed he caught the amusement in my eyes and with a sober face he put his left thumb and forefinger to his nose, pressing his nostrils tightly to exclude the odor of excessive boasting. With his right hand he reached up into the air and pulled downwards. It was such an expressive and suitable gesture that we all copied it at the Opera House for use on similar occasions.

In spite of his many years in the United States, Gatti never learned to speak English well, though he could make himself understood. As clever a man as he was, he could

certainly have learned to speak the language well and fluently. It was my belief that he considered English an un-beautiful language and he therefore preferred his native Italian, or, second best, French. When a discussion in English got beyond him and Mr. Ziegler was not at hand Philip Crispano would be called upon to interpret.

Gatti-Casazza was in public a rather silent and reserved man, though not at all stuffy. Yet he had a true Latin temperament and could be excitable and stubborn and up-in-the-clouds and then suddenly depressed. But I never saw temperament interfere with his work or his dealing with artists. He was most conscientious in fulfilling his promises. If he told an artist that she could sing Tosca, sooner or later she sang the role. If a performance was well done he would give praise, not in fulsome language, but with a few appreciative words that each artist prized for its sincerity.

With my Boss, Gatti was completely relaxed and at ease, and that was the way I knew him best, for I was in and out of the office as they talked over problems and contracts. They carried on animated conversations in Italian, and often there would be hearty chuckles and laughter, and then I was sure that my Boss was relating one of his good stories.

Between four and five each afternoon, Gatti would come in to fling himself into the armchair and sit silently. We might be in the midst of dictation but he would pay no attention to us or we to him. He seemed to need this relaxation, to feel safe from the prima donnas who were eternally after him; here was his sanctuary and we respected it. Gatti had a personal secretary, a loyal and faithful friend, Luigi Villa, but he used to ask me to do odd jobs of typing for him. I remember that I typed his list of stocks and bonds for tax purposes each year, and that it was pages long. After his divorce, though, it was shorter and much easier to do.

I remember one amusing incident about Gatti that made us all chuckle. He loved *Die Meistersinger* and rarely missed a performance. For an Italian this was an unusual preference, because the majority of them go head-over-heels for Verdi, Rossini, Puccini, and the other Italian composers. They are apt to find Wagner rather cumbersome going. But to Gatti, *Die Meistersinger* was a compelling work of musical art. He would sit in the impresario's box in the Golden Horseshoe and lose himself completely in the performance. He would hum and sing along with the orchestra and with the voices, getting louder and louder as he became more and more enraptured. Finally, the patience of nearby patrons would evaporate and they would hush and shush and hiss at him. He would come to, and then sheepishly draw back toward the rear of his box. This complete absorption in the opera seemed to be something he could not control, for the incident would happen time and again, to the amusement of the staff.

When I came to the Met Gatti-Casazza and his wife, Frances Alda, had already parted, though Madame Alda was still singing at the Opera House and did not give her farewell performance until December 28, 1929. The staff admired them for never allowing their personal problems to intrude. By contrast, the relationship developing between Gatti and Rosina Galli, the *première danseuse*, was the talk of the house. We respected and had affection for Gatti and the staff was all for him and for anything that would bring him happiness. But we could not see Galli as the next Madame Gatti-Casazza.

True, Rosina Galli was so graceful, so alive, so competent a choreographer, so truly a *première danseuse*, such a contrast to the huge and reserved Gatti, that we could understand the attraction of opposites. (As far as I am concerned Galli produced some of the most exquisite ballets ever seen

at the Met, and her dancing was superb. Her ballets for *Lakmé* and for *La Gioconda* were especially memorable, and her Queen in *Le Coq d'Or* remains my idea of beauty in ballet.) But, as a human being, Galli was sometimes so egotistic, demanding, temperamental, so difficult to work with or for, that we could not understand love being as blind as Gatti's seemed to be.

Every single item concerned with the ballet had to have Galli's approval from the very start of production. Yet, even so, nothing was certain in that department until the ballet girls were actually making their entrance. Up to that moment anything might happen.

One day I had business in the wardrobe room when Rosina Galli floated in. I never thought of her as walking like an ordinary human being—she seemed wafted on air. Galli had come to reinspect the new ballet costumes that had already had her approval once. I thought they were most beautiful in design and color. Each fluffy delicate dress had a small rose-colored flower at the shoulder. The shade of the flower displeased Galli and grabbing the nearest costume she tore it violently, raging her disapproval. I left hurriedly, feeling sorry for the wardrobe mistress.

Later on I inquired and found that it had taken four costumes to cool Galli's temper, or perhaps she had gotten tired by then. The costumes were remade and all of them had flowers a shade lighter, which evidently pleased Galli. To me they looked the same. We of the staff agreed that Galli was a great *artiste*, but beyond that we could not go.

Rosina Galli had a poodle. She would sit him on the piano where he would lie quietly, looking at her with sad eyes, while in a small sweet voice she would sing him little songs. She taught him tricks too. She taught the poodle to growl and snarl when she shouted: "Heil Hitler!" and flung out her hand in a Nazi salute. When she called out: "Viva

Mussolini!" he waltzed and danced about in joy until he fell panting. This was before Hitler and Mussolini joined forces. The dog was jealous of Galli's dancing and would bark and bark until she stopped. He was a strange little dog and I used to feel sorry for him.

The wooing of Gatti-Casazza by Rosina Galli was also a strange performance and the source of continual wonder around the Opera House. Reversing the usual procedure, Galli courted Gatti with flowers. Gatti did not like cut flowers. He told Mr. Ziegler and me that they reminded him of funerals and he was superstitious about them. He liked flowers growing in the fields and in gardens, he said. Evidently he never dared express this feeling to Galli for she swamped him with bouquets and great baskets of huge, exquisite, and expensive floral offerings. I am sure a family could have lived a year on the cost of this three-month love bombardment.

The staff would be agog to see what would come next. And, incidentally, we each fell heir to at least one of the handsome containers in which the flowers were delivered. I still have an oversize green vase which comes in handy when there are extra long-stemmed flowers to arrange or blossoming branches to display.

The biggest, the tallest, the most expensive, and the most ambitious offering arrived one morning and sent the whole Opera House into an uproar. Gatti was really embarrassed. Maybe he capitulated after that, not being able to stand any more! It took four delivery men to get the gift into the building and into Gatti's office, where it towered to the ceiling: a great big beautiful flowering pink dogwood tree—blooming out of season of course.

Every person in the building found an excuse to come to look at the tree. Within a week the steam heat began to

wither it. Perhaps even Gatti's private remarks—in Italian—helped to break its spirit. The tree and the huge tub which held it disappeared one night, to be seen no more.

I often thought about that dogwood tree and how different its fate might have been had it been transplanted in someone's garden, to flourish in beauty and be cherished. Instead, it played a bizarre role in an exotic romance, imprisoned in a tub in a small room in a theater on Broadway.

The bombardment of flowers abruptly ceased. Had they served their purpose? Had Gatti at least spoken? We could only make guesses. Madame Alda and Gatti had been divorced in 1929. At the end of the opera season of 1929-1930, on June 18, 1930, Gatti and Rosina Galli were married. As Madame Gatti-Casazza, Galli reigned as queen of the Opera House for five years.

Things seemed to go on as usual. But little by little we all became aware of an undercurrent of misunderstanding and dissatisfaction on the part of the new and younger members of the Board of Directors, who were slowly assuming control. A feeling of unrest pervaded the building. "The old order changeth."

It was a severe shock to Gatti to realize that he and the Board of Directors were no longer *en rapport*. He was dealing with new names, new faces, new personalities, new ideas. To Gatti grand opera was his life, his love, his reason for living, and to the Met he had given his best for twenty-seven years. But now he faced the fact that new brooms were waiting to sweep clean. Gatti himself made the decision to retire.

Rosina Galli was violently opposed to this decision on the part of her husband. She wanted Gatti to fight to remain, and she battled up to the last moment against the presentation of his resignation. She was opposed, also, to his deter-

mination to leave not only the Met but America as well. He insisted that she must go with him.

The opera season closed as usual with the passing of winter, and on April 22, 1935, Giulio Gatti-Casazza gave a farewell luncheon, served at the Met, for his closest friends and business associates. Toscanini was present, and all the top stars of the opera whose commitments had not taken them away from New York. Some of the staff were invited. The luncheon was delicious and copious (cold turkey, chicken, roast beef, tongue, and Virginia ham for luncheon, as well as dozens of different kinds of delicious dishes). But for most of us the occasion had over it a pall of sadness.

Now that Gatti was going back to his native Italy he wished to leave as quickly as possible. His restlessness and sadness were only too apparent. He and Mrs. Gatti were to sail on the *Rex* on April 27. Rumors at the Opera House were rife. An authentic one was that there had been a terrible battle the night before, with Galli still trying to keep her husband in America. Bets were made that Rosina Galli would not sail.

Some of us close to Gatti gave him a parting gift. The *New York Herald Tribune* of Friday, April 26, 1935, noted it:

STAFF HONORS GATTI-CASAZZA

METROPOLITAN EMPLOYEES PRESENT TRAVELING CASE

Giulio Gatti-Casazza, former general manager of the Metropolitan, who sails for Italy tomorrow at noon in the *Rex*, received yesterday an initialed sterling silver fitted traveling case, accompanied by the following note from his associates of the man-

agerial, box office, and other staffs of the opera house:

"This small group, which has loved you over a long period of years, asks you to accept this trifle as a tangible evidence of our sincere admiration and deep affection for you."

The note was signed by Assistant General Manager Edward Ziegler and his daughter Suzanne Ziegler; Earle R. Lewis, George Brassil, Cornelia Wilcox and Thurber N. Wilkins of the box office staff; Hugh R. Brown, Frank Garlich, Aimé Gerber, Thomas Hillary, Albert A. Kirch, Louis Roffino, Helen Klaffky, Luigi Villa, Marino Villa and Frank A. Wenker.

Rosa Ponselle, in a wonderful gesture, gave a farewell party aboard the liner. A whole deck was reserved and the Met family had all been invited, from top to bottom. It was to be one of the largest private parties ever held for an individual aboard ship.

The Italian chefs on the *Rex* outdid themselves, for, of course, Gatti, Galli, and Ponselle were their idols. The food covered long tables in the main salon and was in such fascinating and colorful shapes that it looked much too handsome to disturb. It was delicious, too. There was an open bar and plenty of champagne. There was enough food and drink for a party twice the size.

Most of us, I am sure, were relieved when Rosina Galli appeared. So she *was* sailing! Galli looked radiant and beautiful, with a great handsome bouquet of American Beauty

roses clasped in her arms. A wonderful actress as well as dancer, we thought, knowing her real feelings on this occasion. Mr. Gatti sat in a chair in the salon while we ate and chatted and milled about him. He was gray and tired-looking, and made no effort to stand up. I thought of the rumor that he had been through another terrific battle during the night just ended, with his wife still fighting to stay.

One of the stagehands said to me, with sympathy in his voice: "Gatti looks beat up." Victory was his, but I wondered to myself if it would prove to be worth while.

As the time drew near to say goodby, Mr. Ziegler slipped away. I knew he could not bear to stay for the final moment of parting. He and Gatti had been the closest of friends for more than twenty years. They had shared their daily lives, ills, and joys together. The separation was painful.

We all found it hard to say our goodbys. Mr. Gatti was so tired, so sad, we felt we must not add to his sorrow by breaking down. Let's be gay and foolish, we said to each other, and of course the champagne helped! But tears were near. Goodby, Mr. Gatti. Good luck, Mr. Gatti. Come back to see us, Mr. Gatti!

The *Rex* officers were urging us to hurry. We streamed down the gangway, the eyes of all the passengers on us. A section of the pier at the waterfront had been reserved for the party, and we crowded out onto the pier.

The *Rex* was backed out and turned about with the aid of the busy little tugboats darting here and there about the ship. We saw Mr. Gatti sitting alone on the private deck outside his stateroom, waving a large white handkerchief. Rosina Galli did not appear. We burst into song, *Auld Lang Syne*, but soon too many tears were flowing and the melody died away. The big ship headed down the Hudson River and Gatti could no longer hear us.

As I walked down the long pier toward the street, I saw Luigi Villa, Gatti's close and devoted secretary, standing off by himself and crying unashamedly. For the first time in eighteen years Gatti was sailing without Luigi. My own tears started afresh and we stood there, crying together.

Not until I was back at the Opera House that afternoon and the emotions of the morning had eased, did I think of another phase of Gatti's farewell. On the pier singing *Auld Lang Syne* had been a group of the finest and highest paid voices in the world. Probably a group like that would not gather together again in a single song for many years to come, if ever, nor would there be a rendition so packed with real emotion. A fitting finale for the great impresario.

Mr. and Mrs. Gatti-Casazza never returned to this country, nor did they live too long after leaving it. Gatti built a beautiful villa in Italy, but both he and his wife were restless and moved about constantly. His letters to Mr. Ziegler were brief, as if he could not bear to write to the Opera House. Rosina Galli, though much younger than Gatti, died first, in April 1940, just five years to the month since she had sailed away from America. Gatti followed her in September of the same year. Letters from Italy said that Gatti had actually died of grief. First the loss of the Met had broken his heart. Then the loss of the beautiful Galli had left him no further reason for living.

Mr. Ziegler and I often talked of Gatti—we could not forget him. We wondered if he would not have lived longer had he remained in America—and near the Met. The passing of time might have alleviated the pain of no longer being the master of his beloved opera house. And Galli wanted to remain here. Then again, we would argue, perhaps it has all been for the best. Perhaps he *had* been too hurt at having to leave the Met ever to recover. And, of course, there was

the problem of Rosina Galli, who would never have been content to take a back seat. We could only hope that his native land, where he was honored and loved, had given him at least a small measure of happiness in his few remaining years.

CHAPTER 7

THE GUARDIANS

OUR press representative at the Met in those days was William Guard. His long locks of mudgutter blond sometimes looked as if they needed a good washing. He wore a huge black windsor tie around his scrawny neck which joined a long gaunt face to a tall skinny body. His head reminded me of an inverted triangle—flat at the top, coming to a point under his chin. He kept a straggly mustache in some sort of shape and wore a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles which slid up and down his aquiline nose. He was a true Dickens character and worked and lived in a Dickensian setting. My guess was that he was nearing fifty when I first knew him.

Billy Guard's office resembled Mr. Siedle's sanctum. During the many years in which I looked in daily to say hello and to pick up his press releases, I never saw a change in his desk or in the miscellaneous odds and ends on it: old press releases, programs, letters, mementos, and gifts of years. Eventually some would fall off behind the desk or to either side, and so make room for more recent items. Billy never cleaned up his desk and no one else would dare. Occasionally, perhaps with a push from Billy, a bunch of the stuff would fall into the wastebasket and that would be emptied

together with what was already on the floor around it. That alone, I felt, saved Billy from being buried under an avalanche of paper.

No painting had been done in the room for years, I need hardly say. Yet Billy loved his room and lived in it contentedly. He had a hideout somewhere where he went off to dress and to sleep, but his office was his real home. Friends came to see him and avoided the mess and stood up, as there were no unburied chairs. A few hardy close friends would push a pile of papers off the chairs onto the floor and sit down. One thing Billy did do that was of help to me: he kept a small clear space right in front on top of his desk, just large enough for his daily press release. There I could find it and leave any necessary message. These releases were always rewritten by Mr. Ziegler, who had been a newspaperman and a music critic in his day. This was just one more of the duties which Mr. Z. took on and never mentioned, and for which he was never given credit.

Billy Guard, alas, was apt to go off on regular binges. He could be pie-eyed yet still navigate and circulate and carry on his caustic conversations. Those of us who knew him well could always determine by certain familiar signs just how far gone he was. Billy was exceedingly generous and good-hearted when he was himself and we all liked him, so he was able to get away with murder, we often said.

I remember one night when he was really high, and an unfortunate leading soprano stepped into his office to bid him good evening. It was perhaps an opportunity that Billy had been awaiting for some time. Instead of the grateful greeting that Madame had expected, in response to her gracious gesture, Billy detonated a small stick of dynamite under her. He ranted and raved and bellowed so that all in the neighborhood could hear plainly.

His outburst went like this: "My God! You think you

can *sing*! You have the goddamndest lousiest voice I ever heard here. You do nothing but bust your guts and yell. You don't know how to *sing* a goddamn note!" And on and on.

Madame was livid with fury. She tried a few indignant threats, but nothing could be done with Billy in such a state, and she had to withdraw in as regal a manner as possible. B. G., as deep in his cups that night as I ever saw him, went on with his tirade even after she had left.

The whole matter was ignored and forgotten, so it seemed on the surface, but you can imagine that it was the topic of conversation among both artists and staff for days to follow. The truth was that Billy was right. Madame sang leading roles not because the voice warranted it, but because she was *persona grata* with an important personage connected with the Met. The VIP evidently thought it more expedient on this occasion to ignore the matter and to soothe Madame's outraged feelings. There were no repercussions as far as Billy was concerned and Madame shortly sported a gorgeous new fur coat. We all noticed it. Thereafter Madame and Mr. Guard distantly but politely passed each other by in the corridors of the Met.

How did Billy Guard keep his job? He had so many contacts he was invaluable. He knew too much about too many people. He knew every concert manager, newspaperman, society editor, every top socialite in town. He did favors for them and never needed to be repaid. His press releases were good—Mr. Ziegler saw to that. Billy passed out "Annie Oakleys"—sometimes too many and too indiscriminately, so that eventually the management had to call him on that.

I remember one woman who "touched" him regularly for free entrance to the house. She had hallucinations, among

them one that she had sung Marguerite in *Faust* at the Met. Billy used to let her in as a standee, and sometimes she created a commotion during the performance, talking loudly and telling those nearby that they had never heard a Marguerite like hers, until the ushers would have to ease her out. Billy knew this, but kept on letting her in until there were too many complaints. I think he enjoyed the woman's offstage performance and he was sorry for her—he was a kindly man at heart. He knew she was happy reliving the phantom Marguerite of her past in the great opera house.

Once Billy came to an evening performance in full dress with *two* big windsor ties adorning his chest. One was to one side and one to the other, so that there was no doubt at all but that he was wearing a double dose of cravat. We knew at once that he was extra high, and had probably seen two Williams in his mirror and had seen fit to embellish each with a separate beloved windsor.

Billy walked all over the Opera House that night unconscious of everybody snickering. No one called his attention to the extra decoration. It probably would have done no good anyway, and might have angered Billy. We doubted that he ever woke up to the fact that he had on two ties, for he added to his happiness as the night went on at the bar in the Met, and goodness knows when or how or where he ended up that night.

B. G. was fortunate in having an active assistant in Frank Wender who did most of the legwork, as Billy was often unable to meet boats and trains bringing incoming artists. Frank was invaluable to Billy and stayed on at the Met after Billy had gone, until he later went into publicity on his own.

I remember Billy Guard as a happy soul who was having a wonderful time all the time. He died quickly and quietly

one day. It had been fun to know him, and he had had a lot of good friends.

John Edgar was the name of the gruff guardian at the Fortieth Street door who had looked me over so critically the day I first entered his sacred portal. Now we were good friends and he used to tell me about his past life, and his adventures as a young man on the Great Lakes, which he had sailed since he was ten. He had earned his master's certificate at twenty-one, following in the footsteps of his forefathers. He still liked to be called Captain Edgar.

Besides sailing the Great Lakes the Captain had another love in his life—singing. He told me that as he matured he developed a pleasing tenor voice and had finally decided to go abroad to study. He delighted in talking about his singing career on the concert stage throughout Europe. He boasted sometimes that he had been successful enough to remain in Europe for many years.

When the advance of years made inroads on his singing voice he returned to America. Nearly sixty years of age, he had come to the Met looking for a position of any kind, so that he might be near his beloved music. Undoubtedly his good looks and personality and his willingness to take anything available secured him a hearing, and he shortly became the custodian of the Fortieth Street stagedoor. The Captain settled down at the Met to make a place and a character for himself.

Captain Edgar had a most distinguished appearance. Even in old age he was tall, straight, handsome. As he walked down Broadway each day to the Met every passing eye looked him over and many looked twice. He was not averse to admiring glances. In the daytime he wore well-tailored business suits, stiff-collared white shirts, handsome ties. And always a huge ten gallon hat atop his great shock

of white hair. He wore the hat constantly. I had been at the Met for two years before I ever saw him hatless, and then I realized that his vanity kept him covered—he was completely bald.

Great white mustachios were the Captain's pride and joy. I have never seen another pair to match them for width and luxuriant growth. They turned way up at the ends like the German Kaiser's. At evening performances the Captain wore formal attire and he was then a wonderful sight to behold: big, handsome, well-dressed, his mustachios brushed and twirled, and again the wide-brimmed hat firmly and jauntily set upon his fine head. No wonder everyone stared. I admired him anew each time I saw him in the outfit. And gilding the lily, as it were, he always wore a deep pink or red rose in his buttonhole. I understand that every morning on his way to the Met he would stop in at the flower shop in the Pennsylvania Railroad Station and pick up a rose to wear in his buttonhole.

The rose reminds me of Rosina Galli and a peculiar habit she had each time she met the Captain upon her first arrival daily at the Opera House. She would reach way up to his lapel, rising gracefully on her toes to reach that far, and would pull out the rose with a lovely sweeping motion of her arm, and than, playfully, would tear the rose to pieces, petal by petal. She would then throw the petals all around the floor and trample on them, laughing heartily. The Captain would respond with hearty guffaws and seeming enjoyment. A strange morning welcome—yet it happened nearly every day. I often wondered, though, what the Captain really thought about this strange byplay and how much he liked his roses being destroyed so often, since he was fond of flowers.

The Captain was delightful to know, once you had become an accepted member of the Met family. But woe

unto those who tried to crash his gate. How lucky that I had been rescued by Mr. Siedle that day! We all catered to the Captain's love of flowers; the chorus and ballet girls and I, too, regularly brought him great armfuls of flowers from our gardens. The artists sent their handsomest floral offerings to him, and he reveled in this attention. He would stand the flowers in vases all about his desk and on the floor behind him, and at times he sat enthroned in the midst of a veritable flower shop.

I could never make up my mind if the Captain were really that crazy about flowers. He liked them very much, I was sure, but he also took great pride in being able to say: "Farrar sent this beautiful basket," or "Madame Jeritza gave these to me."

Captain Edgar had known all the great stars of the concert and opera stage both in Europe and in America, from the 1870's on, and the old boy liked to boast a bit. Of the stars at the Met, he particularly adored Caruso and Farrar and often said that they were the most human of all the singers. Caruso was no longer living when I joined the Met family, but Geraldine Farrar I, too, adored.

Whenever there was someone around to relieve the Captain he would slip to the back of the auditorium during a rehearsal or performance to hear one of his favorite arias. He was a happy man, for he was doing a job he loved, and he was still a member, even though a silent one, of the musical world.

The Captain was so much a part of the Opera House and so well-preserved for his years that we never thought of his leaving us, or of anyone else taking his place. When at the age of eighty-eight, in 1932, serious illness forced his reluctant retirement, we wept with him and could not bear to see him go. He died shortly after at the fine age of eighty-nine at his sister's home in Detroit. He had been

with the Metropolitan Opera for twenty-eight years, and we all knew that there would never be another quite like him at the Fortieth Street door.

Even today at the Met I can feel the Captain's watchful eye as I enter his door. I know his spirit is there, for that is where he would choose to be.

Quite as distinguished-looking and as well-dressed as any of the patrons entering the Opera House to go to their parterre boxes, Thomas J. Bull stood at the center door of the main lobby on the Broadway side of the house, taking tickets each evening. He was head doorman and supervisor of ticket-takers and ushers. Mr. Bull was at that very door on the evening of October 22, 1883, when the Metropolitan Opera Company opened for the first time in its new home. The production that night was *Faust*, with Christine Nilsson and Italo Campanini, and Mr. Bull in his most formal manner accepted the first tickets to be presented. He told me that the magnificence of the costumes of the ladies and the elegance of the gentlemen who had attended that gala opening night had passed with the years. The elegant 'eighties and 'nineties had an opulence that would not be seen again.

Tom Bull was very tall, very slim, very straight, with snow-white hair and a well-shaped white mustache on a patrician face. He wore a pince-nez. His bearing was dignified, his manner courteous. In his evening clothes, white tie, shiny silk topper, he made a perfect picture of a man of distinction. Louisville, Kentucky, was his native city and he considered himself to the "manner born." I felt that he had decided how his part in life should be played and he never missed a cue. Naturally Mr. Bull knew all the celebrities and socialites and top patrons of opera who entered through his door and went up to the Golden Horseshoe

year after year. He came to feel that they belonged to him and he to them. He could have retired comfortably but he was too wedded to his fascinating job, and wanted to die at his post, he often told me.

After I had moved over to the executive side of the house, Tom Bull asked for a place in my room to house his hat, coat, and personal belongings while he was on duty. I did have a spare closet and was glad to turn it over to him. As a reward he introduced me to my first box of Whitman's chocolates and each week thereafter presented me with a box, the same size and kind all season long. I was particularly careful that no one disturbed any of his prize possessions: an unusually beautiful light tan wool overcoat, featherlike in weight but most comfortably warm. One of the great old stars had given it to him, Mr. Bull said.

At Christmas time I enjoyed seeing the usual ritual of gift collection that the doormen and ushers reaped. Tom Bull, of course, surpassed them all. He had a light but sturdy bag about the size of a two-pound sugar or flour bag, with a drawstring. This bag he kept on hand at his door throughout the Christmas-New Year holiday season. He would come up to my room at times and empty the bag carefully on a desk and a pile of shiny gold pieces would roll out, to be stacked in piles. (This was before the government called them out of circulation.) The gold pieces ranged from a two-fifty to a twenty-dollar piece, and looked like a fortune to me! Tom Bull told me that Clarence Mackay, the financier and opera patron, was considered the best tipper by all the men and boys at the Met then. Alas for those flourishing and grandiose days—they are no more.

Tom Bull didn't care for music. He never bothered to listen to an aria, to see a scene, though he knew the stories of all the operas and answered many questions at his door. His hobbies were fishing and baseball. At the beginning of

each season I would listen to his tales of the big fish that got away that summer, and of the play that clinched the pennant. The gurgle of a stream where he could fish for trout was the greatest music in the world to him, Tom Bull said.

Thomas Jack Bull died on August 7, 1930, at seventy-eight years of age, after forty-seven years with the Metropolitan—a wonderful record. He had left for vacation after the end of the opera season with every expectation of returning. A sudden fatal illness lasted but three weeks. Tom Bull, unlike Captain Edgar, never had the sorrow of having to retire from his beloved post.

Captain Edgar and Mr. Bull, strangely enough, had many similar attributes. Though a contrast to each other in looks, they were each distinguished in appearance. Each was conscious of the importance of his post: Captain Edgar at the door through which the great singers of the world passed, Mr. Bull at the door through which the social elite and the greatest patrons of opera entered. Each had a sense of responsibility to their posts. Like two topnotch prima donnas they usually avoided each other. Neither wished to share the limelight, and each felt that he guarded the most important door in the musical world. They were both big men on their jobs, types not to be duplicated in our busier modern world.

CHAPTER 8

NO MODERN IMPROVEMENTS

THE dressing rooms at the Met were a pain in the neck. In my day it was Mr. Ziegler's neck and at least a weekly pain. The male artists were good sports, as a general rule, about their drab dressing rooms and inconveniences. Of course they did not have such costly and handsome, fragile and fluffy, hoop-skirted or train-length costumes to don, nor such elaborate coiffures to be kept in order, both requiring elbow room and the services of a maid. Life has made it much easier-going for the males in that way, even in opera. But the majority of the women stars did fuss and fume constantly about their dressing rooms.

The artists dressed on the Fortieth Street side of the house and the rooms there were truly very shabby. The room might have a window in it but you could count upon the panes being thick with dirt. The paint in all the rooms was an ugly olive green. Each room was equipped with a plain dressing table with lights around the mirror, a couch with worn upholstery, an upright piano, and open plumbing—a hand-basin and a toilet seat off in one corner without the privacy of a door. In the early days of the Opera House even these important latter conveniences were missing; they had been installed only after many protests, and in the

cheapest way possible. The men weren't as lucky. They all had to go down the hall to a public lavatory.

Farrar and Galli each had a dressing room of her own, which left but three rooms for the other women artists to share. In an opera such as *Die Walküre*, or *Der Rosenkavalier*, both of which have several star parts for women, the secondary artists had to be parked around in any vacant spot that could be pressed into service for the performance. It was a help when the two private dressing rooms were released for general use, yet not enough help to avoid constant complications.

Many were the tears and rages that Mr. Ziegler stood up under, and many the time his best diplomacy was called into use to soothe an irate star before curtain call. It would have been cheaper in the end, it always seemed to me, to have spent the necessary money to improve the existing dressing rooms and to build a few new ones.

Often an artist's maid or secretary would come to the Opera House on the morning of the day on which Madame was to sing to check on the dressing room allotted the star and to see if it was the one she preferred. The rooms were assigned by the member of the staff in charge of rehearsals, and the call boy, who worked under him, tacked the star's name on the designated door.

If the room turned out not to be the preferred one, the maid or secretary would dash to the nearest telephone to notify the singer, and soon Mr. Ziegler's telephone bell would go ding-a-ling-a-ling and Madame So-and-So would be on the wire, protesting that she could not, she would not, sing tonight if she had to use the miserable dressing room somebody had—with malice aforethought, she suggested—picked out for her. She wanted the room across the hall. And why not? she demanded. Mr. Ziegler would promise to check and to call her back. I would go running over to

the Fortieth Street side to find out who had been put where, and back to Mr. Ziegler to report. Then we would go into a huddle to see what could be done.

If the desired dressing room had been assigned to a bigger star, to one who had greater influence, or to one whose artistic temperament would have produced greater fireworks had we attempted to switch rooms, then Mr. Ziegler would have to put on his placating act. He would persuade Madame that the room she had been assigned was really more desirable; that it had just been cleaned, and hadn't she noticed before that it had the best air circulation? He had a dozen other good reasons he could produce, like a magician pulling rabbits out of a hat. (Every once in a while we would think of a good new reason to add to our repertoire.) Strangely enough, Mr. Ziegler usually managed to calm the irate lady, if not convince her completely. He had to put on this act so often that he was an expert at it, and between us we referred to it as Treatment No. 1.

I was always so interested to see what the singers' maids could do with the shabby old rooms. They would come to the Opera House early in the day, laden down with suitcases and boxes, ready to set the scene for their mistresses. Draperies were hung, the open plumbing screened, a good-looking throw was provided for the couch, the dressing table covered with a lovely scarf and set with handsome toilet articles, perfume bottles, and make-up preparations. A framed picture of husband or the boy friend or children or parents was set in a conspicuous spot—a homey touch that impressed fans and was always good for a paragraph in a press notice. Vases were readied for the flowers that were expected from admirers—or that the artist would send to herself. A swish-swish of Madame's favorite perfume to clear the air, and the room was changed into a pleasing boudoir awaiting the advent of the star.

Each artist had her own color scheme and her own choice of materials for draperies and covers, and the varied assortments used to fascinate me. The color scheme was chosen, naturally, to be a background for the star's own coloring. Since friends and fans often crowded into the dressing room after a performance for congratulations and for autographs, the dressing room was a kind of second stage for the star. Some of the artists changed their decorative schemes several times during a season, some were content with one or two sets. Much depended upon the cleverness and ingenuity of the star's maid.

While the men stars did not worry about dolling up their dressing rooms, they usually did bring in a picture of the wife. That used to amuse me greatly, to see one of them carrying in a large picture in a handsome silver frame to be set up for four hours in the room assigned to him. Of course I could think of several good reasons why they did it, but I still think it a silly custom. First of all, it was a tradition they didn't dare break. It was a kind of fetish to insure a good performance. Then, as long as everyone else displayed his wife's picture, woe to the poor man who didn't. Again, it gave the loving-husband touch so dear to many opera-fan hearts and to the ladies of the press. And last, and perhaps most important, it was a kind of protective symbol that said: Look, girls, I'm married!

Do not ask me why, but the tenors always seemed to have more trouble with girls trailing them than the baritones or the bassos. And they also seemed to need a coterie in attendance to give them support before singing, the Italian tenors especially. I have seen a whole contingent of devoted attendants lined up behind an Italian tenor, crowding into his dressing room until one wondered how in the world he had room to dress. They would all be bustling about getting out this and that, making sure that the throat-

spray atomizer was filled, patting and petting him, inflating his ego, and getting all the while in the way and being a general nuisance as far as I could see. But the singer evidently needed this attention and encouragement. Many a hearty chuckle I have had over such a scene.

Gigli, the greatest Italian tenor after Caruso, had a string of admiring helpers that was longer than anyone else's. There would be his dresser, his chauffeur, several female relatives, his press agent, his manager, and sometimes his doctor. As a contrast, a few of the top women stars, like Flagstad, did not even have a personal maid, but depended upon Jennie Cervini, the wardrobe mistress, to look them over and to give the finishing touches to their costumes, which Jennie could do so well and so expertly. The male stars who were on their own could always call on Angelo Casamassa for help.

The architect who designed the Met, Josiah Cleveland Cady, undoubtedly concentrated on building an opera auditorium that would outdo the elegance of the 'eighties, in which era the Opera House was built. Except for the great stage and the auditorium with its horseshoe boxes and gilded trimmings, the house has little to offer in the way of spaciousness or comfort or conveniences. Obviously the artists' dressing rooms must have been a last thought on the designer's part. It is said that Mr. Cady had never designed a theater before, and indeed boasted that he had never been inside one before taking on the opera commission. I read that he did go abroad to study the other opera houses before designing the Met, but I wonder if he ever went backstage in any of them. At least he did produce a handsome and fitting setting for the elegant ladies and gentlemen who attended the opera, and perhaps that was his objective.

If you have ever seen the uninspired and drab building that houses the Metropolitan Opera, you will be convinced

that Mr. Cady did not waste too much time over the outside. And now the dirt and grime of decades stick to it. The Seventh Avenue side of the building, where the scenery moves in and out, is to me one of the ugliest frontages in Manhattan. There is no provision within the building for the storage of scenery. Therefore the sets for each opera must be brought from a warehouse and carted back after the performance. The cost of this tremendous job of moving in and out six times a week (five nights and a matinee, and sometimes a benefit or special performance), is one of the budget-breaking expenses of the Met. Long trailer trucks can be seen standing on Seventh Avenue, waiting for the end of a performance, to load up and carry off the drops. A moving concern is under seasonal contract for the work.

There are many completely different sets and adjustments for each opera, and a different opera is given at each performance. This is one of the reasons why Mr. Siedle, who hired me, was called "the most important stage director in the world" in an article once written about him. He had fifty stage carpenters, twenty property men, thirty electricians, and five engineers under his direction, as well as sixty wardrobe women. And seven storehouses to oversee. Mozart's *Magic Flute* is listed as the most difficult opera in the world to stage, with fifteen changes of scene. The shortest change is fifty seconds and the longest is one-and-a-quarter minutes. *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* is said to have had one scene which alone took three hours to set up with all hands working steadily to be ready for curtain time. A good reason why this opera has disappeared from the Met's repertoire.

It was not until I recently reread the article about Mr. Siedle that I realized how very good we had to be at the Met in those days, before modern inventions resulted in helpful and time-saving methods.

CHAPTER 9

ANGELS AND DEVILS

GERALDINE FARRAR had been the queen of the Opera House for years before I joined the Met family. I had been one of her adoring Gerry Flappers, so it was my greatest thrill to be able now to hear her every performance and to be near her backstage.

In my early days I was so enthusiastic about my work, so anxious to know everything I could learn about opera, that I made a pest of myself. I would corner anyone who would stop for a moment and answer my questions. "Of all the artists," I would ask, "who is your favorite?"

"Farrar!" the first stagehand I asked said immediately, with enthusiasm.

I tackled an electrician who gave me the same answer and enlarged on his reasons why: "Farrar is so friendly—never high-hat—and she's considerate of all of us. We'd do anything for her."

"Farrar—she's got what it takes!" another stagehand told me.

Well, there was the answer to *that* question. No doubt about it, Farrar was tops. She was a *real* prima donna.

They told me, too, of the rumors that had flooded the Opera House in the days when the Gatti-Farrar-Toscanini

triangle had been the cause of many scenes both tempestuous and dramatic. "Yes, siree, Helen," the men backstage said, "Farrar is a wonderful gal."

Farrar's great artistry and her scintillating personality made all of us admire and adore her. She was the pet of the stagehands, the electricians, the technicians, of the men of the Met, and the women too. I'm speaking of the staff, naturally. Other artists could not help but be jealous at times.

The artistic temperament with which Farrar was so well endowed she saved for the conductors, which pleased all the lesser lights in the house. With the staff she was friendly, kind, appreciative of favors, generous at the holiday seasons, and never, never overbearing.

The business of being high-hat is one of the foremost dislikes of the staff at the Met. Every man and woman there has a job to be done which is vital in the artistic production of opera. The entire staff must pull together to make each performance an acceptable production. (At least they did so in my day, and, perhaps, therein lay Gatti's genius.) Some of the stars, having attained the top, developed prima donna complexes, and lived in a rarefied air. Younger singers climbing the ladder of fame felt they must acquire a superior snooty manner. But the greatest artists, I gradually learned to know, are the most human at all times. Farrar was one of these, and Flagstad, Chaliapin, and Traubel were among the others.

Geraldine Farrar was the only prima donna who had her own special dressing room. (Rosina Galli, as première danseuse, had one, too.) Other singers said that Farrar's room was only a stuffy cubbyhole and that no one wanted it anyway, but the fact remains that Farrar alone had her own private niche. Small and stuffy it might have been, but it was delightfully furnished and she adorned it. At the

time of her birthday each year the men loved to decorate the room as a birthday gesture.

Philip Crispano, our property head, called Tech and got me on the telephone. "Say, Helen," he said, "would you like to help us decorate Farrar's room for her birthday tomorrow?"

"Would I!" I said excitedly, "I'll be right down!"

The men had decided to make a garden of the room, and we covered the walls with masses of green vines and intertwined flowers of shades of pink and rose. It did look gay and lovely when we had finished.

The next day a huge handsomely decorated birthday cake arrived and we hastily set up a table to display it properly. Farrar came in later and there we all were waiting to crowd around her and to sing "Happy Birthday." She was delighted with the room.

"It's lovely!" she cried, clapping her hands. "It's truly lovely! Thank you, boys, thank you."

Farrar cut the cake and we each had a goodly slice, and drank a toast to her good health and happiness. It was a happy time to remember and it was also the last birthday Farrar celebrated at the Met, for she retired at the end of that season.

Geraldine Farrar was good to look at, slender, darkhaired, with the most penetrating azure blue eyes I had ever seen, and a lovely smile, so vital, charming, and friendly. How could we help but love her? It was a deep satisfaction and a thrill to watch her performances. She was as fine an actress as a singer, we all agreed. Her Tosca, Carmen, and Butterfly are legends. She sang the role of Butterfly ninety-five times at the Met. I never missed a single Farrar performance even though I had to stand up out front or in the wings throughout. The house was always sold out. The only other artist

I ever did that for was Kirsten Flagstad. I could never bear to miss a note of her Isolde.

Many times I have wished that I might have heard Farrar do *Königskinder*. She must have given a remarkable performance in this opera, because for years I heard people at the Met rave about it. They would say to me: "Oh, Helen, if you could *only* have heard Farrar as the little Goose Girl! She was wonderful! She was *so* lovely!" It must have been so, and how I regret that it was before my time.

No other singer at the Met during the twenty years of my reminiscing had the following that Geraldine Farrar had. All kinds and all classes of people, of all ages, were crazy about her. Farrar used to be showered with flowers, coming from all parts of the house, from the Golden Horseshoe boxes to the top gallery seats. Nowadays no flowers are allowed in the auditorium, but then many bouquets were thrown to the popular singers.

Never has there been such a deluge of flowers at the Opera House as on the afternoon of Farrar's farewell performance on Saturday, April 22, 1922. The opera was Leoncavallo's *Zaza*, another of Farrar's famous roles. The afternoon contained the drama of a lifetime, and in itself could be the material for an opera.

The tension backstage and out front was electric all morning and throughout the performance. Farrar stood up under the strain magnificently, as we expected. It was no secret to any of us that she and the management had been having a clash of temperaments that last year. After years of undisputed reign as queen, it was sad to have such a dispute at the end. To all of us on the staff Farrar could do no wrong. She had said that she would resign when she reached the age of forty, and now she was fulfilling that promise to herself.

That final morning we were all desolate and, to add to

our real sorrow, a sudden order had been issued that the staff was not to linger at the end of the performance, either in the wings or backstage. That meant we could not join in bidding Farrar godspeed. We were astonished and outraged, and then realized that the management hoped in this way to cut down the farewell demonstration. Such petty revenge for big men to concoct!

The chorus and ballet were in tears. The men were furious and were goddaming and shoving the sets around the stage as though they had the management in their hands. Geraldine Farrar was leaving the Opera House for good, and we who knew her well and loved her were forbidden to be with her, to say our goodbyes.

Fortunately, the emotion and surge of the exciting moment swept the order to the four winds. One and all we pushed and crowded onto the stage to be with Farrar as she turned from her final curtain. We trampled upon the thousands of blossoms that had been thrown to the stage by the wildly shouting demonstrative audience that did not want to let her go. You wouldn't believe possible the variety and size of the floral tributes that packed the lobbies before the performance, waiting to be delivered to the singer. The old walls of the Opera House fairly bulged that afternoon with the seething and adoring throng of fans who jammed into every seat and every available space to bid Farrar adieu. I do not know if there had been a demonstration such as this in the Opera House before Farrar's time, but I do know there has never been one to equal it.

Chorus, ballet, staff, technicians, electricians, stagehands, porters—one and all we surrounded our idol on the stage. Such weeping, such cries of admiration and affection and regret and good wishes! I hope they still ring in Geraldine Farrar's pretty ears.

The stagehands made a seat with their hands and lifted

Farrar and, to escape the crowds, carried her through the back door on Seventh Avenue to the open car which awaited her outside. The papers next day estimated the crowd outdoors in the thousands. Many of Farrar's admirers, young and old, who had been unable to gain admittance to the Opera House, waited there to say their farewell. Those on the street took up frenziedly the echoing shouts and huzzas from the auditorium.

I stood with others on the fire escape watching Farrar until her car was pushed around the corner and up Broadway out of sight, following the old prima donna ritual. Inside the Opera House the ballet girls were still crying and the men sniffing. In her own generous way Farrar had given many of us farewell remembrances, but the loveliest remembrance to me would be of her charming self and of her memorable *Butterfly*.

Truly, it was a day to witness and to remember forever.

It was years before Farrar came to the Opera House again, for her quarrel with the management had been bitter and deep. So I was overjoyed one morning to walk into Mr. Ziegler's office and to see her there. She had come, in her ever gracious way, to plan for a speech she was to make in the "Save-the-Met" campaign.

A few years later I saw her again when I visited her at her delightful home in Connecticut. She had written that she would be sitting on a big rock at the side of the road near her home at a stated time, waiting to greet and guide us to the house. As we made the designated turn in the road we saw her ahead, slim and lovely as ever, wearing a large beautiful hat of burnt straw over her lovely white hair. Geraldine Farrar, the great prima donna, the toast of two worlds, was sitting there waiting to entertain us royally. Do you wonder we loved her so?

The picture of that happy day is still with me and will always be clear in my memory.

Antonio Scotti, renowned Italian baritone and the Met's most famous Scarpia in *Tosca*, had one of the longest careers of active singing at the Opera House. He was born in Naples in 1866, made his debut at the Metropolitan as Don Giovanni on December 27, 1899, and sang his farewell performance in *L'Oracolo* on January 20, 1933. He was a top artist at the Met for thirty-four years and sang until he was sixty-seven years of age—an enviable record! On his retirement Scotti returned to Italy and died in Naples in 1936. He had sung with fifteen different Toscas during his Met career. I missed an opportunity when I failed to ask him which *Tosca* he preferred, though others did. They told me that he was most diplomatic and mentioned several.

When I first knew Scotti he had formed an opera company of his own, appropriately enough called the Scotti Opera Company. He had been singing in the financial crash of 1929, and hoped to recoup his losses with his opera group, which he took on tour at the end of the Met season. Unfortunately, he lost all he had in this venture.

I well remember doing all the typing of operas, casts, and plots for the many auditoriums throughout the country wherever his troupe was to sing, and had endless correspondence about it. It was not until the company went on the road that I woke up to the fact that I had made a contribution to the Scotti Opera Company, since the Met was not sponsoring the tour in any way, and the work had been done on my own time.

It was no particular imposition, because "Ask Helen" had become a familiar and much-used phrase at the Opera House, and often I willingly lent myself to work that was really none of my business, so to speak. I wrote personal

letters for artists by the ream, asking for passports, sailing permits, making reservations, tracing lost luggage, acknowledging congratulatory notes, and a-hundred-and-one other items.

On January 1, 1924, the Metropolitan celebrated Scotti's twenty-fifth year with the company by giving a special performance of *La Tosca*, as a benefit for Scotti. It was a gala evening with a full house, and many who could not attend sent congratulations in the form of checks. As a result, Scotti had innumerable notes of thanks to write.

A week after the benefit Mr. Ziegler called me to his office and there was Scotti, with a big portfolio filled to the brim with letters. Mr. Ziegler said: "Miss Klaffky, would you please, at your leisure, mind writing a few thank-you notes for Mr. Scotti? He just cannot afford a secretary and he doesn't write English very well as you know. Won't you *please* do them?" Mr. Ziegler looked at me pleadingly; he knew very well what a task he was setting me, and that it would indeed have to be done at my leisure if at all, for we were swamped with regular work to be done.

Scotti took my hand and squeezed it as he slipped the portfolio under my arm, and he too looked pleadingly at me out of his soft Italian eyes. What could poor Helen do but say yes, as usual? Truthfully, I had blisters on my hands when I had acknowledged the last of the letters and gifts. Again a contribution to art—and something to remember Antonio Scotti by.

When I returned the portfolio and list to Scotti, he was good enough to come in and thank me (not everybody bothered), and he handed me a large photograph of himself inscribed: "*To the dear Helen with sincere gratitude, Antonio Scotti.*" He was an old dear and a fine artist, and I never regretted the blisters.

* * *

Maria Jeritza had been engaged to appear at the Metropolitan in 1914 but the contract could not be fulfilled because of the start of the first World War. As soon as peace came to the world, the matter of her contract was reopened and she came to America in 1921. She was already well known in Europe as a leading soprano, having sung in Vienna, Prague, Budapest, Berlin, Bremen, and Stockholm.

Jeritza made her debut at the Met in *Die Tote Stadt* by Korngold, on November 19, 1921. *The Dead City* had never been sung in America so the opera, too, made its debut. The role gave the new singer a wonderful first entrance on stage, and with her big and beautiful voice and experienced singing, she took the opera-town by storm. Jeritza entered over a bridge, with all eyes lifted and focused on her. Josef Urban had designed one of his Urban-blue backgrounds—the deep handsome shade that he used so many times at the Met.

The artist wore a magnificent white satin gown revealing her lovely figure; her statuesque beauty, wonderful golden hair and true-blue eyes, against Urban's setting, caused a great gasp of admiration to run through the big house. From then on, while Jeritza was on stage, no one could tear their eyes away from her. We called her our Blonde Bombshell: big, beautiful, blond, bewitching.

Shortly after her debut Jeritza sang her second role—Tosca. She had a bit of stage business, a little scheme of her own, that wowed the audience. During the struggle with Baron Scarpia, Chief of Police of Rome and a dirty dog (sung as usual by Antonio Scotti), she rolled off the couch in his apartment with such reality and yet with such grace that again the audience gasped aloud. And then they oh'd and ah'd as her great mass of gorgeous gleaming golden hair came tumbling about her. Jeritza herself had been preparing for this dramatic moment while singing, touching

her hair caressingly now and then, unloosening a hairpin and allowing it to slip to the stage floor. The last few and important pins came out in the struggle with Scarpia, and a shake of the head achieved the wonderful effect at just the proper moment.

I used to watch this performance with the keenest delight, keeping close watch to see the pins slide unnoticed to the floor, and then quickly looking at the faces in the front rows in the orchestra to see if anyone had taken notice—but no one ever seemed to catch on. It was truly an act of legerdemain.

Other artists on stage with Jeritza must surely have felt their noses slightly out of joint, for she was so alive, so animated, so sparkling. You never wanted to miss a single motion and kept your eyes glued on her. She did so much enjoy doing startling things!

In the opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Santuzza has a violent quarrel with her lover Turiddu on the church steps, and he casts her aside. Jeritza had the head carpenter, Bill Warren, add two more steps to the entrance up to the church door so that when, as Santuzza, she was cast aside, she could roll down the steps with sufficient abandon. Other artists had been better pleased with as few steps as possible to fall down, but Jeritza with her flair for drama wanted to make the most of the dramatic tumble.

In the *Jewels of the Madonna* Jeritza as Maliella was lying flat on a hard wooden bench when she suddenly tumbled off, flat on the stage. That's a trick to do, and to do it as gracefully as the tall Jeritza did it was an art. No other artist worked as diligently as Jeritza did to produce such startling effects. Jeritza also had the skill and ability to handle perfectly the longest trains ever seen on the Met stage, particularly the one she wore in *Turandot*. She could manage her train so easily and beautifully that it seemed a

natural gift, but it took practice and skill to accomplish it.

In *Thaïs* Jeritza looked so delicate, angelic, and saintly that you would not have been surprised had a pair of wings sprouted and carried her off. This was in the last scene of the opera when, as a penitent in the order of the White Nuns, the soul of Thaïs has been saved. For publicity purposes Jeritza had her picture taken as the penitent, clothed in a simple lovely white silk enveloping robe. But she could not resist having the folds of the costume draped in such manner that the picture revealed a beautifully developed, if presumably penitent, female form beneath the robe.

Jeritza was electrifying off stage as well as on—a happy-go-lucky sparkling personality that we all delighted in. She kidded with the stagehands and they of course ate it up. A clever woman, Jeritza worked at achieving the right effect in everything she did. I remember that she had an electrician change the clear bulbs around her dressing table to amber-colored bulbs, matching those in the footlights, so that when she made up in her dressing room the effect would be the same on stage. No one else had thought to do this, strange as it may seem.

A funny story goes with that. The dressing room that Jeritza used had a different star occupant for each performance. The electrician whose task it was to put the colored bulbs in place just before Jeritza was due at the Opera House also removed them before the next artist took over. Prima donnas being what they are in temperament, he did not want to give anyone else the idea of colored bulbs, fearing he would be changing bulbs in every dressing room every day. But one day he forgot to remove them in time. An important star arrived and fretted immediately about the different color of the bulbs, saying they made her look ghastly. The maid summoned the electrician who made the mistake of explaining that he had changed them at the

request of Madame Jeritza, but did not bother to explain why. Just as he feared, the star was up in arms at once. "If Jeritza can have colored bulbs, why not I?" she demanded. And proceeded to order the amber bulbs replaced immediately with pink ones—a favorite color!

The management allowed Jeritza a round sum for costumes, the same as other artists received, many of whom had their costumes made in the wardrobe department. But Jeritza imported hers, and the handsome materials and real laces, the jeweled trimmings, and the superior design and workmanship must have been so costly that the sum allotted could have been but a drop in the bucket. The costumes she wore always were outstanding and wonderfully becoming. Her so-blue eyes and golden hair set off any dress she wore, either on stage or on the street.

When Jeritza was singing, her maid would stand in the wings holding a dish of pineapple, and the singer would snatch a quick bite of the fruit during waits between arias. Many of the stars, both men and women, had special little helps like this waiting in the wings.

As I said previously, Jeritza had a big, beautiful, and satisfying voice. As one of the stagehands said to me: "It's got umph!" In that one season of 1921-1922, which was Farrar's last and Jeritza's first, they both sang the role of Tosca. It was an interesting comparison to see how the dark slim intense Farrar and the big blonde exuberant Jeritza could each in her own way make the role come alive so vividly.

At the end of the 1931-1932 season, after ten most successful years, Madame Jeritza decided not to renew her contract at the Met. However, she did return for a special benefit performance of *Die Fledermaus* on February 22, 1951, to the great delight of her friends and admirers.

* * *

Chaliapin was a bombshell too. I remember him so well, as who wouldn't who ever knew him! He was a thrilling actor as well as the greatest basso the Met ever heard. He had a superb figure and carried himself like a true star of his native Russia. His formidable personality was tremendous: he was the extrovert of all extroverts at the Opera House.

The great basso sang as he pleased, he monopolized the stage, and with gestures of his own he conducted the orchestra as he sang. The conductor and his men perforce had to follow the lead. He could not be led or denied. He was conductor-stagemanager-star all rolled into one. The critics said that he had a "highly developed parlando, though he could sing lyrically with a somewhat baritonal beauty of tone when he chose." He could do anything he wanted with his voice. His Boris Godunov and his Mefistofele were magnificent and unforgettable.

Chaliapin sang at the Met as a guest star without being under regular contract—he would not be tied down to one—and the management was happy to have him on any terms. Gatti-Casazza brought the singer to New York for a performance of Boris on December 9, 1921. Chaliapin was then fifty-two years old, with European triumphs of years in back of him. Curiously enough, it was his second appearance in New York.

Fourteen years previously, in 1907, Heinrich Conried, then director of the Metropolitan Opera Company, had brought Chaliapin over for a Met debut after his first successes abroad. While the singer's "voice and acting ability were admired, the robustness of his impersonations was scarcely congenial to the current taste"—so said the critics of the day! The ladies of the early twentieth century evidently were not ready for "robust" performances, for after one season Chaliapin with his great voice and acting ability was

sent back home to Europe like a naughty boy. It took the first World War to change the viewpoint and manners of the world so that we might appreciate and accept him in 1921. When Chaliapin came to the Met in 1907, Mr. Ziegler was the music critic on the New York *Herald Tribune*. It always pleased my Boss to remember that he alone of the New York critics gave the new singer full praise for his performance and predicted that he would be one of the world's great singing artists.

Feodor Ivanovich Chaliapin was born a peasant. He had few educational advantages, only a God-given voice and natural acting abilities which took him to the heights. He remained with the Met for eight seasons, singing a limited number of performances each season, but only because he would not sing any oftener than he chose. His last appearance in New York was in a recital in 1935, and he died in Paris in 1938.

Chaliapin was a friendly person and in his delightful broken English would greet you affectionately in passing. He liked the female members of the staff, all right. When I would meet him in the funny old elevator used by the artists and staff at the Met, he would put his big arm around my shoulders, giving me a real Russian bear hug, towering over me though I am more than five feet eight. He would inquire most solicitously after my health and happiness. He was just as solicitous about each young woman he met and we all liked him immensely.

Every artist in the house felt it a privilege to hear, to watch, to work with him, even though it was a strain to keep up with his vitality and unorthodox stage manners. The conductors and orchestra men had tremendous admiration for him, too, but it was a relief when each one of his performances was over; he was unpredictable and both con-

ductor and men had to be on their musical toes every moment Chaliapin was on stage.

No encores of arias are allowed at the Met. It took Chaliapin—who else?—to break this rule. In a performance of *Don Carlos* one afternoon (December 2, 1922), the audience applauded with such intensity, and at such length, that Chaliapin stepped forward and began to repeat the aria "*Ella giammai m'amo.*" The orchestra naturally had to accompany him. Only Chaliapin could get away with that at the Met.

What a man he was, what an artist to remember! It is a privilege to have heard him—the only one of his kind in a hundred years.

CHAPTER 10

WHAT PRICE BORI?

LUCREZIA BORI has never known that she nearly cost me my life!

One afternoon, at the end of my third week of employment at the Metropolitan, Bori was appearing in a performance of *La Traviata*. All morning I had been anticipating the rise of the curtain. It was my first opportunity to hear both the opera and this famous artist. For several days previous to this particular morning, I had been feeling quite miserable, but my delight in my new work made me push the annoying stomach pains into the background of my thoughts. I had hesitated to tell my mother, knowing she would insist upon a visit to our family doctor, who in turn might put me to bed, depriving me of happy days at the Met. Not for Helen! Then, too, youth and my usual good health made me sure that the pains would go of themselves. Just something I ate, I told myself. That I was on the verge of a critical, almost fatal, illness never occurred to me.

As the curtain rose on *Traviata* I was standing in the wings and from then on I was absorbed and thrilled with the music and with Bori's ravishing Violetta. But in spite of my concentration on the music, I could not help but be aware of increasing pains in my stomach, pains that were

more alarming than ever before. Oh my aching tummy! Yet I could not tear myself away from Bori.

Instinctively I must finally have doubled up and clasped my arms about my midriff, for Philip Crispano, our master propertyman, came over and said: "What the Helen is the matter with you? Are you sick? Why, you're green!"

"Oh Philip, I do feel terrible," I said, "but I just *can't* leave this music. Isn't it wonderful! And Bori—she just tore my heart apart in that second act. I can't go until this finishes."

"Nuts," he said in utter disgust. "Whatever is the matter with you—you just better get the hell out of here and see a doctor. You're sick. Don't get to be another daffy musician."

But not until the very last note of *La Traviata* had died away did I leave my place in the wing. I had wept and wept as Bori, so pathetic, so beautiful, so lovely to listen to—had sung her last faint note with fading breath. Then, with the sharp and deadly pains still doubling me up, I hurried for the Long Island train, longing for my home and bed. But I never reached home that night, nor for eighteen long weeks of days and nights to follow, and my bed was to be a hospital bed of pain and acute suffering.

On the train out of New York I was so ill that I collapsed and had to be helped off at the Jamaica station. An ambulance rushed me to the Swedish Hospital in Brooklyn. My mother was hurriedly sent for because, being under age, her signature was necessary before the doctors could operate. With all the haste possible, it was nine o'clock that night before my mother reached my bedside. The surgeon was waiting with the bad news.

"You have a critically ill daughter," he said. "A ruptured appendix, I'm afraid. It will be a miracle if we can save her."

Perhaps I was just naturally rugged. Perhaps my deter-

mination to live and to return to the Met sustained me. Undoubtedly the wonderful medical care pulled me through what was usually a fatal illness. I submitted to the tortures of the treatment cheerfully—anything to get well, to get back to my job. There were days and weeks when my surviving at all was in doubt, when I was too ill to know what was happening. But my dreams were wonderful! I was busy as a bee about the business of the Technical Department. I stood in the wings though the big house was empty, and Bori sang for me alone. The whole orchestra and Bori were performing just for Helen, the newcomer!

My devoted mother spared no expense, to the utmost of her means. I would awaken and then try to go back to my dreaming, knowing that everything possible was being done for me. I had specialists and constant nursing, every known treatment, four operations, and many blood transfusions.

The first operation was performed in the hospital in Brooklyn where I had been taken from the train. After an interval, a specialist was called in, and it was decided that I was to be moved to a New York hospital for further operations and special treatment. My transfer was to be made in a private ambulance, my mother told me. As soon as I knew of the proposed trip I started to plot. I said nothing about my plans, knowing only too well that the opposition would be drastic and final.

It was my crazy idea to have the ambulance stop at the stage door of the Met so I could see some of my friends and be assured that I was not forgotten, that I was expected back. An idiotic idea!

Yet I thought about it day after day, waiting for word that I could be moved, composing imperative speeches to be made to the ambulance attendant to gain my way. Messages, flowers, fruit, and good wishes galore had come to me at the hospital from the whole Technical Department.

Mr. Siedle had written that, though he had been forced to hire a substitute he was waiting for my return. The thought of a substitute at my desk worried me. Perhaps Tommy and Walter were beginning to like her better than me. Perhaps Mr. Siedle was better satisfied. I knew that a long road to good health and a resumption of work lay before me, and that many things—even death—might prevent my return to the Met. I *had* to see the old building again, to talk with a friend or two. That would be a better tonic, I felt, than all the expensive and important medication that I suffered through each day.

The difficult thing to accomplish was to talk the ambulance attendant into such a harebrained scheme. After all, I was still a very sick girl and he might think my demands just the ravings of a seriously ill patient. I must be calm and determined. Then another horrible thought came—suppose an interne or a stiff starched nurse accompanied me. Could I possibly influence a doctor, or a nurse in charge, to do less than their duty, to conspire with me? I prayed that all the doctors and all the nurses in the hospital would be much too busy to go ambulance-riding across the Brooklyn Bridge.

My nurse told me one morning that I was to be transferred that afternoon. "We didn't tell you sooner," she said, "as we didn't want to excite you." Little did she know what excitement had been going on inside me day after day! I was wrapped up warmly, rolled to the ambulance entrance, lifted in, and the door closed.

Hurrah! There was a kindly looking fellow beside my stretcher-bed, my own private nurse, my mother—but *no* doctor. I must talk fast and convincingly, but I had first to catch my breath, to calm myself. We were speeding across the bridge toward Manhattan before I could begin my campaign and were at Thirty-fourth Street before the attendant

and nurse gave in. What is it they say—never underestimate the power of a woman—no, not even a sick one!

“Only a moment, we warn you,” they said, “and we are damn fools to do this.”

There I was looking through the glass window of the ambulance at the grubby Fortieth Street door in the dirty old Met building—and what a *beautiful* sight it was! I waved my hand at the astonished men standing in the doorway, who immediately came crowding to the window in the rear of the ambulance, calling out their surprised welcome to me. Yes, I remember Captain Edgar and Tommy Hillary coming out. I asked for Walter, but they said he wasn’t around. Yes, I also believe Martinelli, the great tenor, came and gave me a glad smile, but my eyes were blurring. I was weeping—I was so happy.

“Get well, Helen! Good luck, kid!” from Tommy. From the others: “We’re all plugging for you!” “Come back soon under your own steam, Helen!” “We’re waiting for you, kid.”

“That’s enough!” said the attendant. “Get along, Jim.” The ambulance bell clanged sharply and we were on our way. I felt new blood surging through my veins. I was happy again, and inside me was the conviction that I would soon be back under my own steam at my beloved Met hearing Bori and *Traviata* again.

Eighteen weeks in the hospitals and six weeks of convalescence—twenty-four weeks in all—and I was back at the Met, entering the stage door, calling ecstatically to everyone, being hailed by one and all: “Helen’s back!” I went up the stairs to the Technical Department and opened the door and there a huge floral archway built over the gateway and a sign which said *Welcome Home, Helen*. Tommy and Walter and all the men who could crowd into the room

were waiting for me. I danced all around the room to show them all how well, how strong, and how happy I was. I had been at the Met only a short time when this almost fatal attack had taken me away for twenty-four weeks—long weeks. And yet, here was I, the newest member of the staff, being welcomed back like royalty. No wonder people were forever astonished at the closeness and solidarity of the Met family!

I have heard *Traviata* many, many times since this first performance and there have been times when the performance has given me a pain—not because of my ruptured appendix! Bori, however, is another story.

Lucrezia Bori, who started me on these reminiscences, has an especial and particularly favorite spot in my memories of these days at the Met. She was one of the Met's top sopranos, possessed of an exceptional lyric voice. I always marveled at her ability to project her voice with such finesse, and this, coupled with genuine emotion and expert artistry, made her one of the great artists of the day. There were glamour girls at the Met, but one just couldn't refer to Bori as a glamour girl only. Truly she was glamorous, but in a queenly sort of a way. She had a tremendous following, and a particularly faithful one. For instance, Calvin G. Child, who for years was laboratory manager of the Victor Talking Machine Company, lived in Philadelphia, yet he never missed a performance in which Bori sang. He simply adored her, as did many other men.

Spanish to the core, Bori's years in America had not changed the innate pride of birth which I have read is so characteristic of the well-born Spaniard. Her aristocratic bearing precluded any familiarity whatsoever. This gave the stagehands, chorus, and some of the staff the impression that she was high-hat, and some of them called her that. When you met her about the building she seldom spoke and her

somewhat forbidding stare stopped friendly greetings. It was not until I had known Bori for many years and because of circumstances began to work closely with her, that I really grew to know her, to appreciate her, and to like her as well as any of the artists with whom my work brought me in contact. Always her sincere admirer as an artist, now I liked Bori as a person, finding her charming, kindly, and appreciative of work and favors. She was very human, too. She always wore adorable hats; at least they looked that way on her. Sometimes in talking about the hat she had on she would tell you: "It was a bargain. I only paid three dollars for it." What a difference between this star and the wife of a famous lyric tenor, who would sit in the box office and make the girls there drool when she would say: "Oh I just bought a little hat today. I really didn't pay much for it—only about forty-five or fifty dollars I think. Really quite reasonable." Not so with Bori; she got a kick out of a bargain, and, anyway, Bori could wear a three-dollar hat and it would look like a fifty-dollar hat on her; but the tenor's wife—well, what do you think? I agree with you, bargains would do her no good!

No, definitely no, Bori was really not the difficult, up-stage personality I had been imagining for so many years. I regretted that I had ever done so.

Bori's tiny, slim, delightful little figure showed off her carefully chosen clothes to perfection. Her jet black hair was shining and sleek, her dark eyes large and lustrous. A big red-headed girl like myself could not help but envy such petite distinction, such vivid dark coloring. Speaking of Bori's slim figure reminds me of the day when Bori, Miss Barry, our telephone operator, and some others were having a chat in the Thirty-ninth Street Office and, oh dear, the subject got around to my excess weight. Suddenly Bori bid us adieu, and then within a short time she was back at the

Opera House and handed me a book which she had gone down to Macy's to purchase for me entitled *Eat and Grow Thin*. Well, I am still eating—but let's skip the rest.

I doubt if I ever heard Bori sing any role in which I was not completely enamored of her. Who could ever forget her Mimi, her Manon, her Mignon (I can see her now running about the stage in her bare feet), Micaela in *Carmen*, her Mélisande, her Fiora, her Magda in *La Rondine*, her Violetta, and many, many other roles.

When the Metropolitan Opera Company started its first "Save-the-Met" campaign in 1933, Lucrezia Bori, always in favor with the board members, was made chairman of the campaign. The campaign was to be for half a million dollars, as I recall it. Bori worked unceasingly on the project and did a splendid job, and it was during these campaign days that I came to know her better. Mr. Ziegler asked me to give her all the help I could. "But don't neglect our work, child." That amused me. I wondered, each time I heard a request of this kind, if he expected me to perform the miracle of adding more hours to each day. But somehow or other I always managed to weather each new storm of the sort that arose.

The early morning mail was dumped on my desk—hundreds of letters daily. This was the Met's first big appeal to the public for support and it was a thrill to extract the checks, money orders, and dollar bills, and to find them coming in from all over the United States. Almost every contribution contained a letter, always praising the Met. Everyone in power at the Met wanted to know the day's take. So the result was that I had to make at least ten copies of the account of all monies received daily, with names and addresses of donors, so that the board members would know, dollar by dollar, what was happening. The original copy together with the daily intake I would take up to Albert

Kirch, who was assistant to Frank Garlichs, our treasurer. Mr. Kirch had to keep a close check on my records, had to keep a record of all monies for his department, and had to make the usual bank deposits. In thinking back now, Mr. Kirch and I practically handled that entire campaign—no, I certainly must include Mr. Ziegler, who was constantly getting artists and friends of the Met to make the necessary curtain speeches.

I remember the trouble I had with some of the speeches Miss Bori made. Mr. Ziegler always dictated them to me first—as a matter of fact Mr. Ziegler really wrote these speeches and Miss Bori added her own special touches. She wanted her speeches written out in an especially peculiar way. First I would have to take the paper and fold it in accordion-pleat fashion. Then the speech would have to be typewritten in capital letters, and after that was done I would have to be sure the paper was folded correctly so that when Miss Bori got out on the stage, all she had to do was to hold a small bit of paper in her hand and as she read the speech she would keep unfolding it and turning it, so the words showed on one pleat after another. Nice going if you can do it.

Most of the time these talks were not dictated to me until about fifteen minutes before the artist would have to be out on the stage reading them, and it was always a "Hurry, child, he [or she, as the case may have been] will have to make this speech during the next intermission." I remember one day when I was called upon to come to take "speech dictation," I arrived in Mr. Ziegler's office and found both Geraldine Farrar and Lucrezia Bori sitting there. Miss Farrar had come back to the Met to make a speech. As I have said, it was the first time she had come backstage since the day she left the Met, and, of course, it was a real thrill for me to see her. I felt a very restrained atmosphere in the office

and then I remembered what some of the stagehands had told me—that these two stars had been rivals in their day. This was before my time, when they both sang many of the same roles. At all events there they were. The speech was written and Farrar did her stint to save the Met.

In addition to the several campaigns for funds, Bori also interested herself in the formation and progress of the Metropolitan Opera Guild. This was another device to interest the general public in attending and appreciating opera, and in contributing to the maintenance of the Metropolitan Opera in particular. Now that opera was on the radio every week a whole new field of prospective listeners and contributors had been opened up.

I shall never forget Mr. Ziegler's reaction to the new Opera Guild, run by women. Ever since the establishment of the Opera House the business of running opera and all its ramifications had been entirely in the hands of men. The board members were men of big business, millionaires with cultural interests, patrons of the arts. Women played their part I am sure, just as they have a finger in all pies, but their influence was exerted upon the men at home, indirectly, and they were satisfied to show themselves in all their glory in the Golden Horseshoe boxes. Now women swarmed in and out of Mr. Ziegler's office every day. They were on the telephone asking questions, making demands, upsetting office routine. Imagine Mr. Ziegler, the Great God Brown of the Met, who had always had everyone say yes to him, having now to acquiesce to women! Long experience in handling temperamental artists helped Mr. Z. to keep his own temper and his dignified poise. But his resentment on many occasions ran high. It was a dose of bitter medicine, and he hated to take it. Yes, I witnessed many an explosion in the privacy of his office.

Here was a man who had always held the rein firmly in

his hand, who expected everyone to yield and follow, and never to be disobeyed. Now he was surrounded by charming ladies out of the top drawer of society with whom it was politic and necessary for him to co-operate. He was so annoyed at first that he began to be exercised about little things. He developed quite a mania, for instance, about the hats of one charming and able woman. Always a small hat, it sat upon her head, tilted forward at a dangerous angle. I could see that the shape of the hat differed, but to my Boss they all looked the same though they came in various colors and with different trimming—flowers, leaves, ribbon, fruit. When the wearer of these bonnets was expected, Mr. Z. would begin to fuss and say: "My God! Wonder what she'll wear today!" He and I had a number of discussions about these hats. I always thought they were exceedingly smart, and I said the lady certainly could wear them. Whereupon my Boss said: "Well, perhaps she ought to model hats instead of representing the Metropolitan Opera Guild." "Certainly," I said, "and I think she would make a good model." Oh my!—the early days of the Opera Guild produced some funny incidents. Often my Boss and I would burst into uncontrollable laughter, which rather cleared the atmosphere and eased the situation.

The first year of the Guild naturally was a terrific experiment for all concerned, but then its work became so well defined and so extremely valuable—under the competent and gracious guiding hand of Mrs. August Belmont and her assistants—that the Opera Guild today has become one of the most important and an integral part of the opera machine. However, I believe my Boss never became entirely reconciled to the interference and to the power wielded by these women.

During the season of 1935-36, Bori found herself forced to cancel some performances because of indisposition and

finally came to Mr. Ziegler, saying that she wanted to retire. This was a shock to all of us. We couldn't think of *La Bohème* without Bori; in fact, we felt she just mustn't stop. Everyone meant it truly and was genuinely sorry about her decision. I have never forgotten a very wise remark Bori made one day when she was leaving Mr. Ziegler's office. He had been trying to convince her that she was foolish to quit, whereupon she said: "I don't *want* to stop, but I can't find anyone who can give me back my youth; so truly I must stop." After she made her exit on that remark, Mr. Ziegler and I didn't say a word for a few moments for we were both deeply moved. Then Mr. Ziegler casually said: "Yes, youth. There comes a time when we all want it back."

On Sunday evening, March 29, 1936, a gala performance was given at the Opera House as a farewell "Adios and Brava" for Bori. She had come to the Met in 1912; behind her lay a successful career with many triumphant performances, and an unusually pleasant association with board members. The artist was retiring at her own expressed wish. All in all it made for a truly gala evening. Bori was one star to leave the Met with flying colors and a pleasant taste in the mouth; there was no vituperation, no regrets, no hard feelings. Oh, that it might always be so!

A wonderful musical program had been prepared for the evening. The house was crowded to the last possible lawful standee, the boxes filled with the cream of society, Bori sang twice; Violetta in the second act of *La Traviata* with Nino Martini, Pearl Besuner and Lawrence Tibbett; and a scene from *Manon* with Richard Crooks and Leon Rothier. Three other excerpts from operas were sung from *La Forza del Destino*, *Die Walküre*, *Il Trovatore*. The other artists were Elisabeth Rethberg, Kirsten Flagstad, Rosa Ponselle, Giovanni Martinelli, Lauritz Melchior, and Ezio Pinza. Top that if you can nowadays!

On the afternoon of the day of this farewell performance, I remember Lucia, Bori's faithful maid for many years, calling me and saying that Miss Bori had requested that Miss Wilcox (of the box office staff) and I come to her dressing room that evening before the performance as she wanted to see us and say a very personal good-by to us. She thought that there would be too much confusion after the performance to do this. So about a half-hour before curtain time Miss Wilcox and I went to Miss Bori's dressing room. We had a nice informal chat with her, and she presented Miss Wilcox with a beautiful silk fan, and gave me a very beautiful jade bracelet—all in remembrance of her. Naturally, we both were thrilled and there were kisses and tears.

Mr. Ziegler worked hard on a special and beautiful program as a salute to Bori. The Board of Directors had a most eloquent and all-embracing tribute, too, which my Boss wrote, as he usually did most of the speeches, tributes, and publicity about and for all the Met. Mr. Z. could compose these things easily and with but little rewriting—no doubt due to his newspaper training. But for Bori's tribute he wrote and discarded page after page, and then finally decided upon a short but telling tribute. He felt it would be an anti-climax to top that of the board members. He was satisfied at last with four lines, and I think he well accomplished his purpose. These lines were then signed by Edward Johnson:

To Lucrezia Bori

As a friend —most understanding
As a woman —adorable
As a colleague—ideal
As an artist —irreplaceable

The Board of Directors presented Bori that evening with a huge diamond pin that had been worn by the Empress Eugénie of France—truly a museum piece. The presentation climaxed a wonderful evening and everybody was happy. It was made on the stage with every member of the staff, technical departments, and many friends standing there with Bori. And so Bori left the Met, though her interest in the Opera House has never slackened.

For my money, there is still to be another Mimi to equal that of Lucrezia Bori, our little lady from Spain—and how could I ever forget her Violetta!

CHAPTER I I

TURN OFF THE HEAT

ROSA PONSELLE—a magic name that conjures up superb singing. A little Connecticut girl of Italian parentage from a modest American home, who climbed steadily up the musical ladder to the very top, to fame on the stage at the Met. Where is there a Norma like Ponselle's today? *Ernani*, *Il Trovatore*, her wonderful Selika in *L'Africana*, Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni*—where is there a great soprano voice to sing these roles as Ponselle did so easily, so beautifully, only a few years ago?

Turn off the heat. Whenever I hear anyone say anything about turning off the heat, I am constantly reminded of Ponselle. A phobia Ponselle had was heat; not the lack of it, but any heat at all. Her dressing room had to be cold and the stage as well, or she said she could not and would not sing. Her secretary, faithful Edith Prilik, would call the Opera House usually on the morning of a Ponselle performance to remind us to turn off the heat. We knew well that it had to be done, and never forgot. The temperature of her dressing room was her own preference and no one minded the freezing atmosphere there, but that of the stage involved other singers: the chorus, the ballet—usually with but few clothes on—and all the backstage technicians and

crew. But the prima donna's word is law at the Met and everyone else had to freeze and very often sneeze. That a Ponselle performance meant a cold stage was an accepted fact and I have an idea that those who could wore their red flannels. I know the men backstage often had to have a wee bit to warm them up for the ordeal.

Before each performance in which she sang either Ponselle herself, or her secretary, or some other emissary would go to the stage to feel the radiator pipes, to make sure they were stone cold. It amused the stagehands greatly that the pipes had to be felt, for the air was freezing and the men had been shivering all afternoon. Mr. Ziegler had, I remember very well, constant complaints from the other artists who often developed colds after a Ponselle performance. But the management had no choice. Ponselle simply would not sing with heat in the pipes! The engineer in charge tried to develop a system that would satisfy Ponselle and yet save the others on stage and backstage, but he had no success. Ponselle was too vigilant; the radiators had to be absolutely cold to the touch.

Once the engineer tried a stunt and in consequence I got a good bawling out. As a general rule Ponselle came into the Opera House by the stage door on Fortieth Street as that was the entrance nearest to her dressing room. As luck would have it on this particular night, a cold one, she entered through the door to the executive offices on Thirty-ninth Street. This necessitated her crossing the stage in order to reach her dressing room on the other side of the house. The first thing she did upon reaching the stage was to go to the nearest radiator pipe to feel it. The pipe was red hot! But no hotter than the temper which Ponselle thereupon produced. It took but a moment to relay the awful news to Mr. Ziegler and for Helen to be bawled out. Poor Helen, who had had nothing at all to do with the whole

scheme, and who had faithfully issued the usual warning: *Ponselle tonight—no heat!* Backstage I cornered the engineer and learned the truth. First, it was a bitter cold night and he was trying to give the other artists a break. Second, he had expected Ponselle to come in by the Fortieth Street door as usual and to feel the pipes there. It seemed he had turned off the heat on the Fortieth Street side but had let it come through on the Thirty-ninth Street side. Ponselle had double-crossed him by coming in the wrong way! Who could blame him for a good try? I kept out of the prima donna's way and Miss Prilik's that night, I can assure you.

Many great singers have been cursed with the bogey of stage fright, but Rosa Ponselle had the worst case I ever saw. She really suffered. She was petrified with fear each time she stood in the wings waiting for her cue. She was so nervous she made all about her nervous. She was sure she would never make her high notes—yet they always came over without fail, pure and powerful and magnificent. It was no good for anyone to stand next to her as she waited, encouraging her, assuring her; no, she had this terrible phobia about high notes. How many times Mr. Ziegler and I would discuss it, and so many times he would say: "She sings her high notes with such ease, just like water running off a duck's back. Whatever is the matter with the woman I will never know." But it seemed no one could either comfort her or ease her nervous tension. Then to your utter amazement she would step out on the stage and her beautiful voice would fill and thrill the big house, and the high notes would be perfect.

While on the stage and singing she certainly never gave any impression of nervousness or of a fear of any note whether it was high or low; she always seemed in perfect command. But when her next scheduled performance came around, there she would be in the wings just as nervous, as

tense, and as worried about her high notes as always. Each season when it came time to issue a new contract to her she was forever trying to cut out this role and that role, always imagining that she couldn't sing them anymore, until I believe her roles got down to practically one—Carmen. It is too bad that she let this phobia dominate her and with marriage as a reason withdrew her great talent from the musical world. Had she continued her career she might very well, à la Flagstad, have been packing them in today. To me her desertion of a great career was a tragedy.

When Ponselle went to sing at Covent Garden, London, she was consumed again with the perpetual high-note bogey. Great batches of mail ensued between New York and London. It developed that a tuning fork of the right pitch had to be sent from America. Mr. Lionel Mapleson, our musical librarian at that time, had this matter in hand. Mr. Mapleson's father had been a famous music librarian, too, a librarian to the King of England. Each piece of music in the valuable library which our Mr. Mapleson had inherited from his father was marked: *Librarian to His Majesty*. The Met had the use of this wonderful collection for years. When Mr. Mapleson died, his son Alfred took over at the Met. Alfred was another one of the fine chaps at the Met. A six footer, he looked more like a football player than a music librarian. Later Alfred left the Met and established his own musical library in New York, one of the most important and largest of its kind.

This whole matter of sending a tuning fork to England seemed to become so involved, with each little detail being tossed back and forth across three thousand miles of ocean, that finally Mr. Mapleson became very tired of the whole mess and every time he looked or happened to meet me, he called me Miss Tuning Fork, a name I must admit I didn't care too much about.

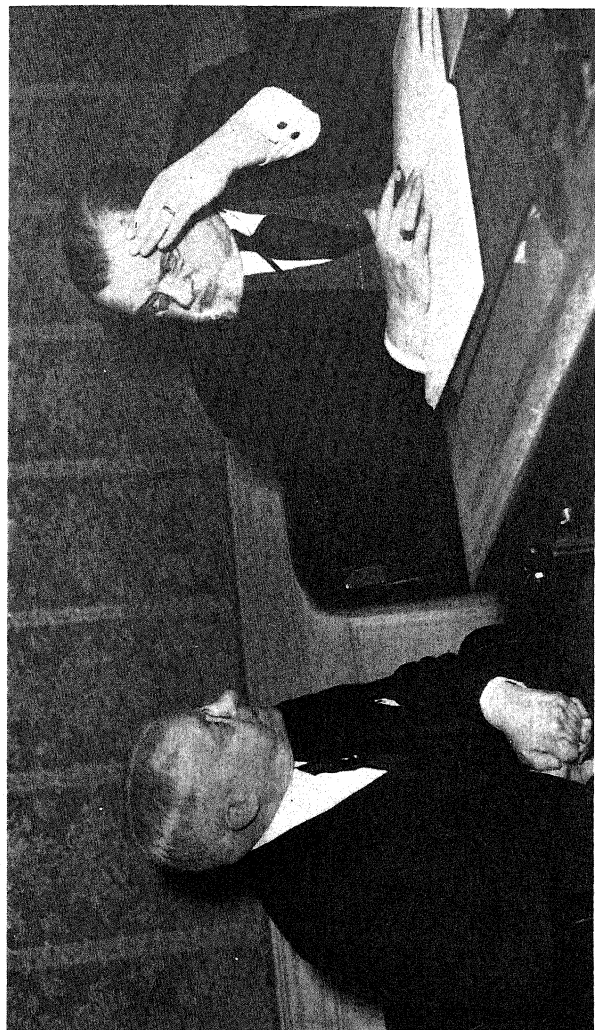


*Edward Ziegler, assistant general manager,
Metropolitan Opera.*

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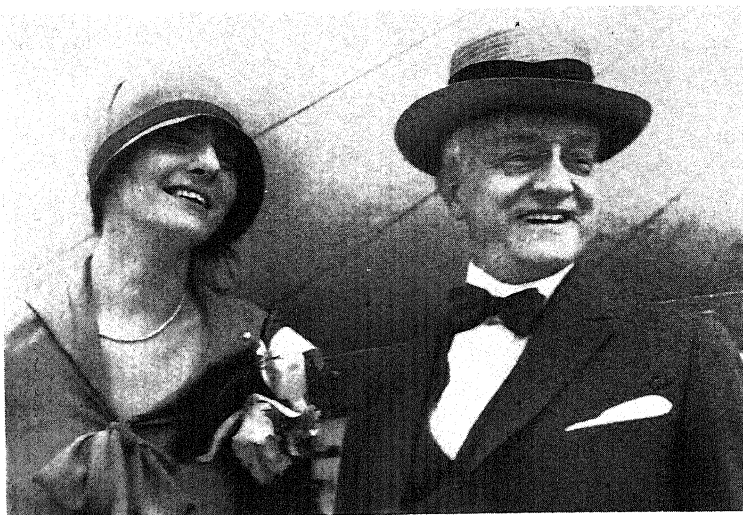


Eduard Siedle with the technical staff. Fred Hosli at right.



Mr. Ziegler and Mr. Gatti at work.

COURTESY WIDE WORLD PHOTOS



Mr. Ziegler and his daughter Suzanne sailing for Europe.

COURTESY BAIN NEWS SERVICE



My Boss, with Chaliapin and Billy Guard.



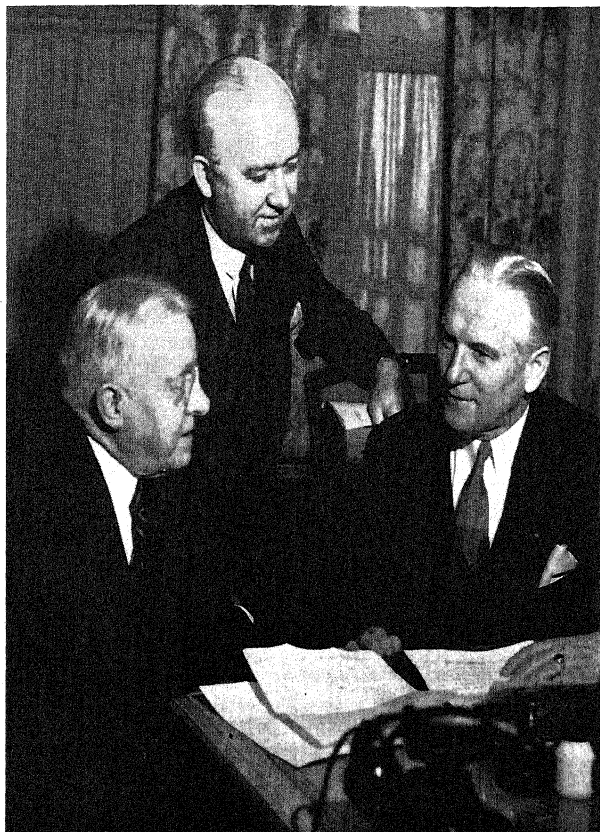
Cover of menu for testimonial dinner to Mr. Ziegler when he left the New York Herald for the Met.

CARTOON BY NORMAN LYND



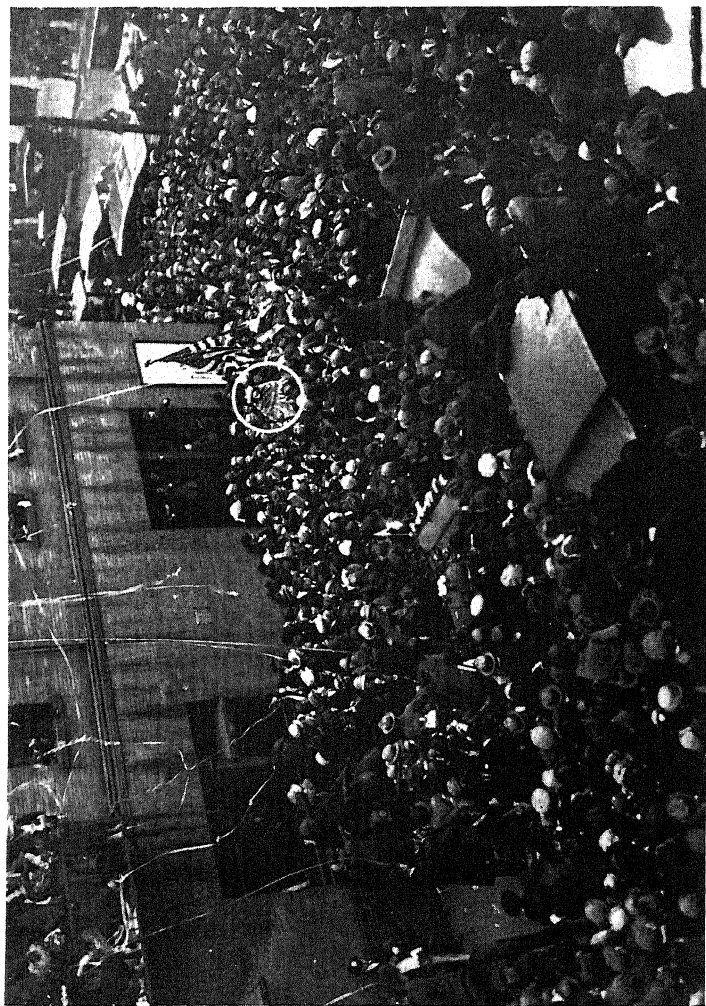
Helen Noble.

PHOTO BY JAMES ABRESOH

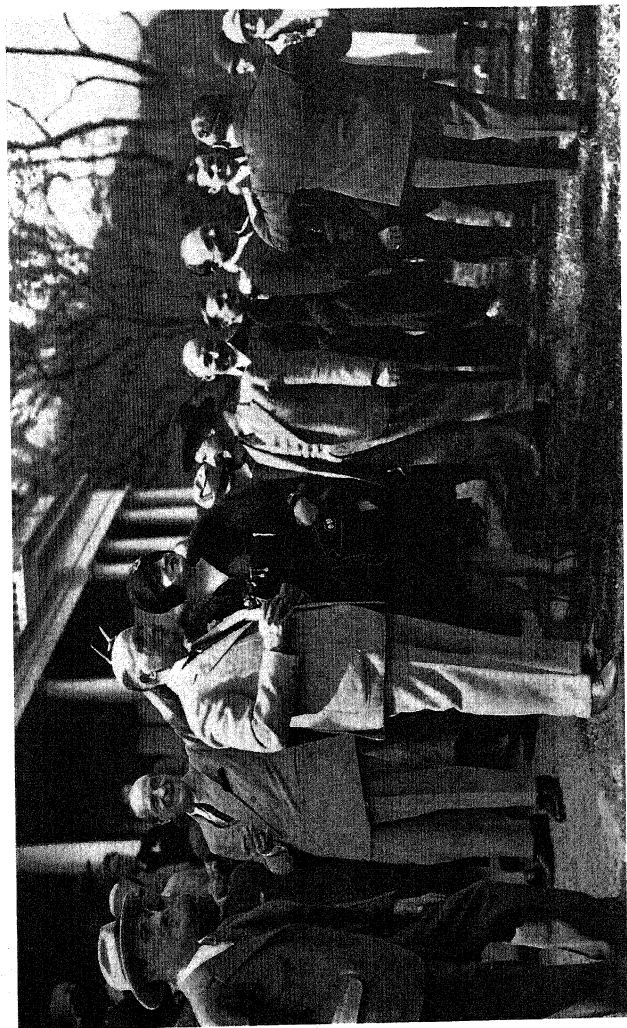


*The Triumvirate: Edward Ziegler, Earle Lewis and
Edward Johnson.*

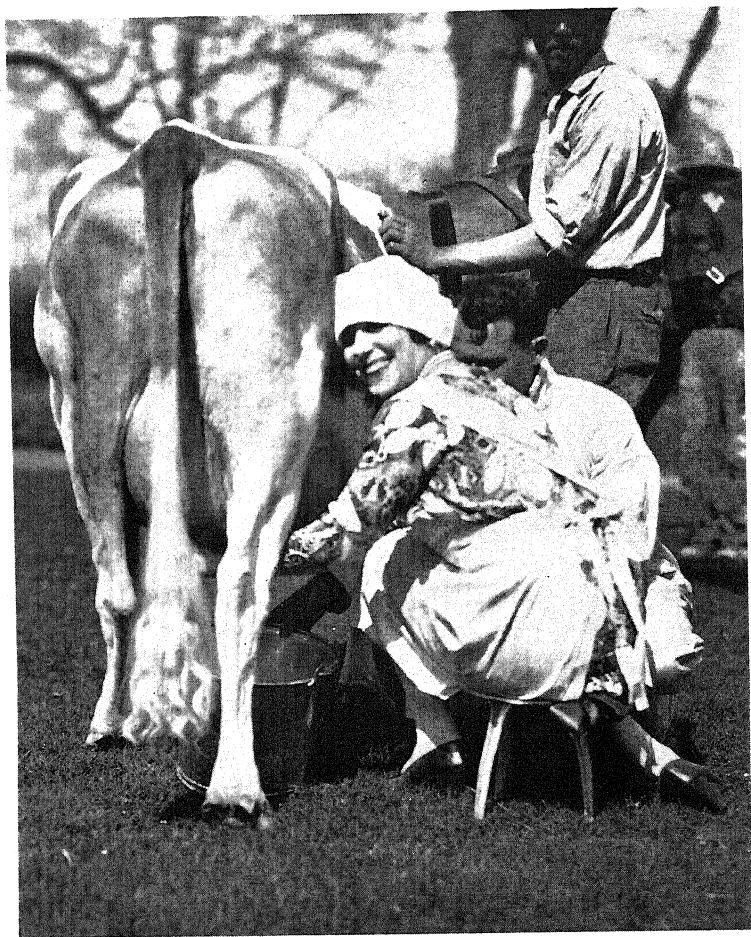
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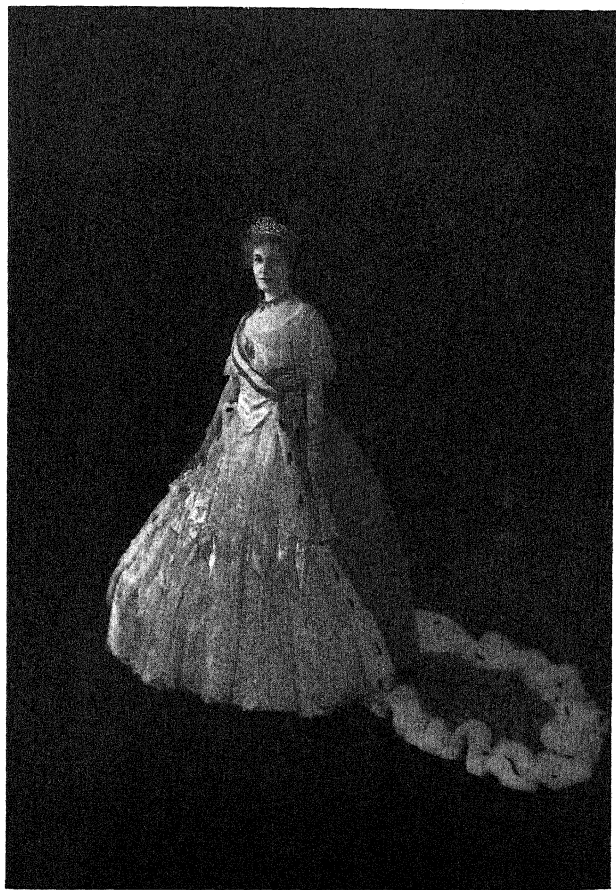
Farrar's Farewell: Scene outside the stage door, April 22, 1922.



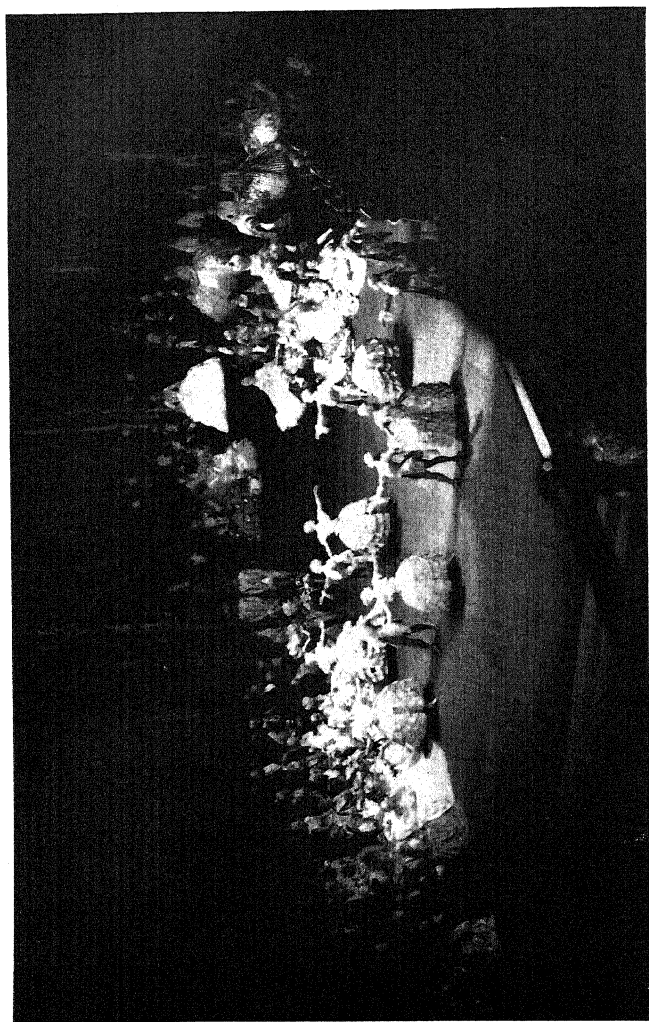
At the Warfield Barbecue, 1927: Antonio Scotti, Colonel Warfield, Rosa Ponselle at left, Lawrence Tibbett and Giuseppe De Luca at the right.



Miss Bori at work at the Warfield Barbecue.



Mrs. August Belmont, founder of the Metropolitan Opera Guild, as the Empress Eugénie of France (Opera Ball, 1933).

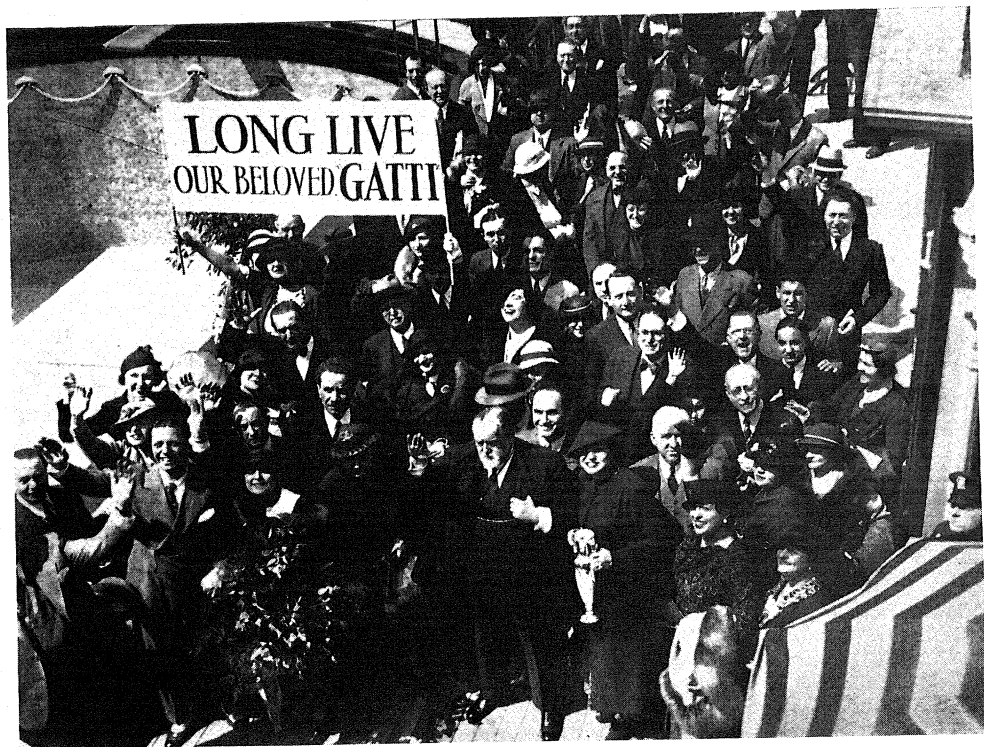


Scene at the Opera Ball, 1933.

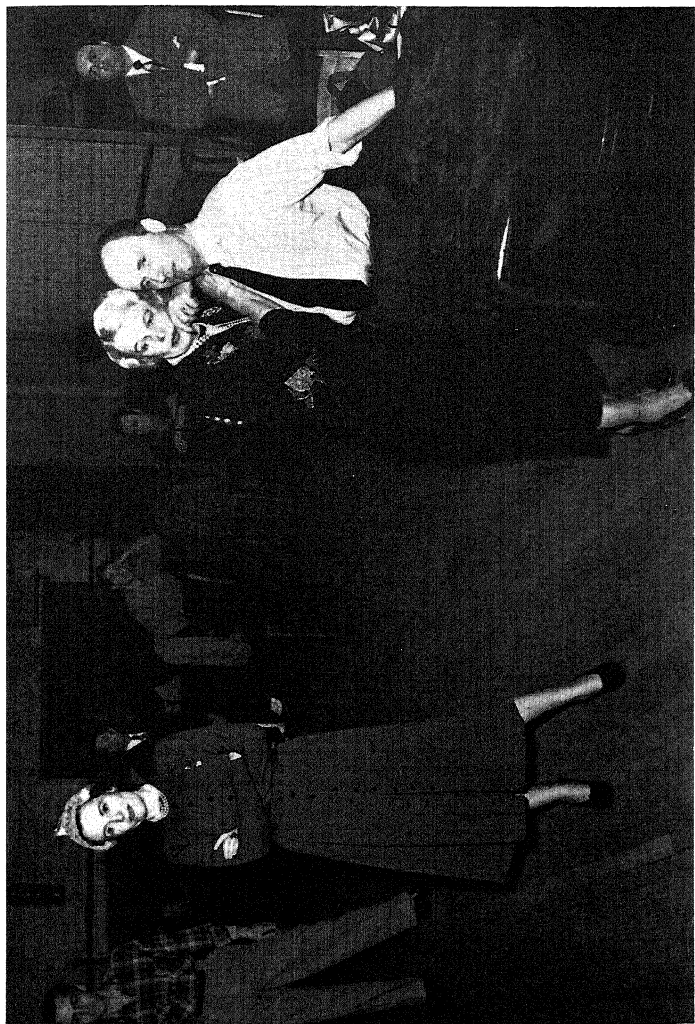


Lily Pons on the stairway at the Met.

COURTESY SEDGE LE BLANG

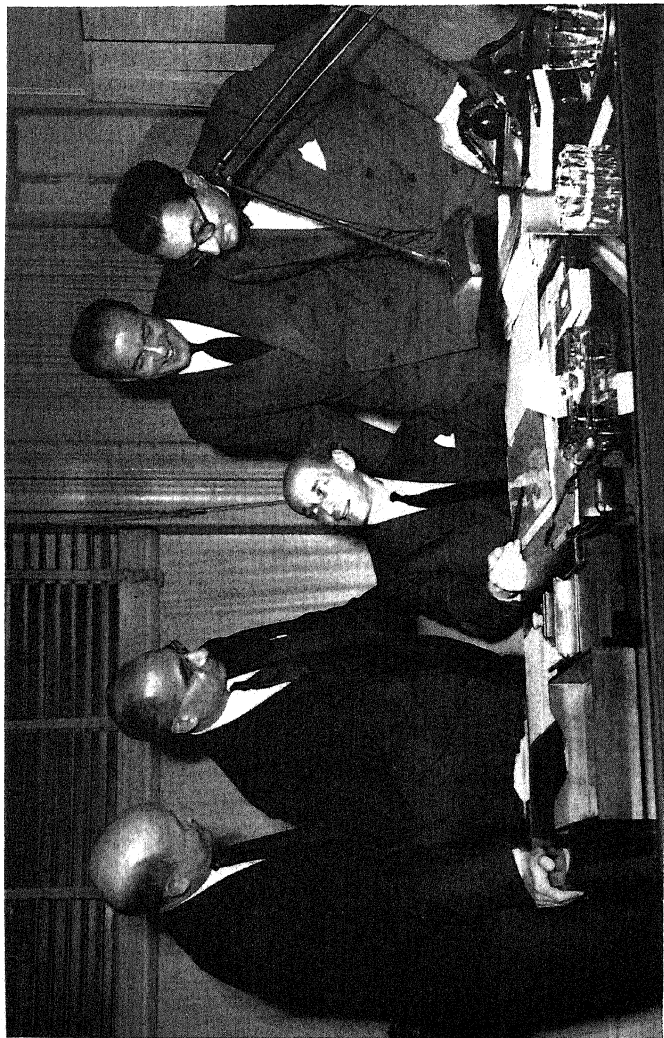


*Mr. Gatti waves farewell to America aboard the Rex, April 27, 1935.
(Rosina Galli and Rosa Ponselle in foreground.)*



Maria Jeritza and Jaromila Novotna at rehearsal.

COURTESY SEDGE LE BLANC



The present management of the Met. Left to right: Messrs. Robinson, Rudolf, Bing, Allen and Gutman.

COURTESY SEDGE LE BLANC

"Why, Mr. Mapleson, must we send a tuning fork to London? Haven't they any tuning forks there?" I asked.

"Certainly, they have tuning forks. It's all Miss Ponselle's nonsense. High-note phobia—she's simply afraid they won't have the correct pitch and wants our tuning fork sent there. The whole thing is maddening. The woman's high notes are simply glorious, she has nothing to fear," Mr. Mapleson replied.

All I remember about it now is that Miss Ponselle certainly got to London, sang at Covent Garden, and as usual made a tremendous success with her glorious high notes. In fact her *Traviata* was more a favorite there than in America.

I remember the first time I heard Ponselle sing. It was my first season at the Met and the spring tour was being prepared. I was working hours overtime each day on the jobs that Mr. Siedle passed along to me. Time was precious, but Mr. Siedle came into the office one night and said: "Helen, go down and listen to Ponselle singing Leonora in *Il Trovatore* and wait for the fourth act aria." Work or no work, Helen flew down the stairs to the stage and stood in the wings. This was my introduction to Ponselle and to *Il Trovatore*, but it was not to have the disastrous effects of my first hearing of Bori and *Traviata*. Ponselle was just beginning the aria in the fourth act as I reached the stage, and to me her voice was the most glorious dramatic soprano in quality and in depth I had yet heard. I was numb with delight. Back in the Technical Department I said to Mr. Siedle: "I don't know where I have been, but it was out of this world."

The stagehands were all crazy about Rosa Ponselle's great voice and her ability to sing, but they felt that she had at times a rather difficult attitude—her mania about heat alone would have explained this. The men behind the scenes at the Met are good music critics, among the best lay critics

in the world. They will bow willingly to the artistry of any star. They also recognize true friendliness and graciousness. When a star has both voice and good manners, the boys really worship her, and will go to any lengths to please. The same holds true for men artists, of course. But then most of the male singers, except a few tenors, hardly ever are upstage and temperamental. They never seem to feel it necessary to impress the importance of their positions upon any of the crew or staff.

In Carmela, a mezzo-soprano, the Ponselle family had another fine singer, though Carmela never reached the very top as did her sister Rosa. Carmela had a limited engagement at the Met while Rosa was prima donna, and on December 21, 1932, they appeared in *La Gioconda*, Carmela singing Laura to Rosa's splendid *Gioconda*. It was an excellent performance and a joy to hear the sisters singing together. It was a "first" at the Met in my time to have sisters singing leading roles in the same opera, though I believe the Ravogli sisters sang together a few times in *Orfeo ed Euridice* in the last century.

We used to have an occasional Sunday night concert at the Met, when the artists put on something in the nature of a high-class vaudeville show, and they had a wonderful time clowning. At one of these affairs, Rosa Ponselle was scheduled to sing "Kiss Me Again" in musical comedy style. She had her dog with her on the stage—a little white poodle—and I remember how tall and beautiful she looked in a swirling white chiffon dress that showed off her dark coloring and hair. She put the little dog on a chair and tried to make him do the tricks she had taught him and which he had done at rehearsal. But doggie exhibited something of his mistress' usual stagefright and would do nothing but sit and shiver. But Rosa was in a gay and unusually relaxed mood that night and laughingly gave up trying to make the

dog perform. She came toward the front of the stage, vivacious and alive, and in her big and glorious voice proceeded to sing "Kiss Me Again" as no one had ever sung it before and as I have never heard anyone sing it since. She also sang the coloratura part, which is kind of an introduction and is rarely sung, as few singers care to tackle it. The house was hushed; one could have heard a pin drop while she was singing. But when she ended it broke into such "bravas" and stamping and clapping. Rosa's coloratura performance reminded me that I had heard other great singers do the same thing—project their voices into another classification. The old type of well-trained singer that came to us from Europe could do this. I have heard them sing an aria or a song far out of their style and range, just for the fun of it, and they were wonderful.

Having sat through many mediocre professional renderings of "Kiss Me Again," I am so grateful to Rosa Ponselle for having given me the memory of one perfect performance of the way the composer dreamed his song might be sung.

At the end of the performance I went back to my office to get my wraps, and found that Ponselle and an attractive young man with a camera had taken over. (Perhaps this was the reason for her unusual vivacity that night!) The young man was busy shoving the furniture about, posing Rosa first here and then there, trying out effects, calling for an electrician to bring the proper and necessary lights. They ignored me completely. It was an amusing performance and I enjoyed it, especially when I thought of all the fine portrait photographs that Rosa had for publicity purposes. But the young man was evidently wanting his very own snapshot of the great prima donna. I was a bit relieved when they decided to stop playing, so that I could get to my

closet for my wraps and catch the last Long Island train for home.

"Rosa, you are insane to do this," I heard Mr. Ziegler saying to her as I entered the office one morning:

"Don't you worry, Ned darling, I am very careful; no harm will come to me," replied Rosa.

"It is absolutely crazy, extremely dangerous, and we beg of you to stop it," said Mr. Z. Then he went on further: "We simply cannot have one of our greatest artists riding a bicycle from her home on Riverside Drive, all down Seventh Avenue in that terrific congested traffic. Why, you'll be killed—for God's sake, can't you understand?"

Like a child with a new toy, Rosa had a new bicycle and she wanted to ride it. Who wouldn't? So she had got into the habit of riding her bike all the way from her home on Riverside Drive, down Seventh Avenue, and as she entered the Thirty-ninth Street entrance she would hop on it again and ride right into Gatti's office. What an uproar went on then. We often watched her head for home again on her bike and wondered many times if she would make it. It was nerve-racking to us watching her, or rather the automobiles dogging her. After a while the novelty wore off, much to the relief of all of us.

Rosa Ponselle was full of fun, especially, they tell me, at parties. I remember one day when I was in Frank Garlich's office. Mr. Garlich was our treasurer and I was taking his dictation when Rosa arrived in the office. Now you would have to know something about Mr. Garlich to appreciate this story. He was one of the most important people in the house—first of all because he paid all the artists and staff. He was a bachelor, a conservative business man, very shy, and a bit afraid of the ladies. While one would not exactly connect him with, shall we say, show business, yet he

seemed to fit in beautifully at the Met. He was a Lutheran—devout—and would never come to the Met on a Sunday. He had a tremendous amount of detail work to do in the accounting department, and had the capable assistance of Albert Kirch and Henry A. Fischer, who are still at the Met. Mr. Ziegler was forever bothering Mr. Garlichs for detailed statements on this and that and, always, everything had to be rushed. Yet, with all this, I never once remember Mr. Garlichs losing his temper and never did I hear a profane word from his lips—most unusual! Recognizing his sterling qualities he received respect and admiration from one and all. One minded one's manners around Mr. Garlichs. I often wondered how he could keep his mind on the drudgery of books and figures while such exciting music went on about him. But these less glamorous jobs are as important to the opera picture as anything else; money is certainly a most vital part of the opera business.

These three men kept the books and handled the financial details for the company. I took all the dictation and did all the typing for them. Yes, there were many, many statements always to be made up, and especially when there was a Board of Directors meeting. My, what a last-minute skirmish there was getting these statements in tow for the Board. Mr. Garlichs would have me type a statement, then it was given to Mr. Z. for his perusal and approval. Mr. Ziegler would begin changing this and that, and many times as I watched him working over these statements, I sort of thought of him in the same light as an interior decorator who may come into your home and say that this settee belongs there, that chair there, and this lamp over here. Figures seem to be movable, and there were always many changes before a final statement was whipped into shape. Mr. Ziegler was always the one person to give the final approval on all statements issued from the Met.

Well, that day while I was in Mr. Garlichs' office Rosa arrived to pick up her check. Mr. Garlichs got up from his chair to go to the cabinet or safe to get her check, when without warning Rosa grabbed him around the neck and gave him a long Rita Hayworth kiss right smack on his mouth. He pulled away from Rosa and I thought he would have a stroke. His whole face was fiery red and he was sure angry. Naturally, we all howled with laughter but poor Mr. Garlichs was furious. After that he was always on his guard when a prima donna entered the room. He was never going to be embarrassed like that again.

Mr. Garlichs was fond of music, particularly the German operas, and he also enjoyed the ballet. He never sat anywhere but in the first or second rows in the orchestra. He loved to sit down front. Some people do.

I understand that Rosa gave a repeat performance of her kissing act one day out in our Box Office, at which time the box office staff told me they were sure Mr. G. felt like slapping her—he was so angry. Perhaps he took Rosa too seriously; she was only having fun—a friendly joke. Nevertheless, Mr. Garlichs was one of the fine, firm balance wheels that a house of temperament such as the Met needed.

Mr. Ziegler often wrung his hands over the tragedy of having under contract a great singer who would not sing the roles for which she, if anyone, was so well fitted, and who wanted to sing the one role, which unfortunately had been so panned by the critics—Carmen. All that my Boss could say to encourage Ponselle, all his pleading and even insistence, were of no avail.

The inevitable happened. Rosa fell madly in love. Marriage was the solution to her problem. So with her marriage to Carle A. Jackson of Baltimore in 1937 she ended her career at the Met. Few plaudits, so well deserved, marked her retirement at the top of her career. Mr. Ziegler fairly

wept and we were all disconsolate at the unnecessary loss to the musical world of so much glory and beauty of voice.

Thank goodness, recording was already quite well developed during Ponselle's singing career and we still may hear her. As a special treat for my friends I put on Rosa Ponselle's records of *Il Trovatore*, *Norma*, and *La Vestale*, and I think of her performances in *L'Africana* and *Ernani* and then I ask them: "Where do you hear singing like that today?"

CHAPTER 12

OUR JOHN BARRYMORE

GOOD to look upon, with a personality that came right up to you and embraced you warmly, Edward Johnson was our John Barrymore at the Met. Had the lady subscribers of the Opera House been addicted to swooning like Sinatra fans they would have swooned at Eddie's every performance.

Every woman in the Opera House—and I am sure a hundred more outside the Met—felt that Eddie was her personal friend. He would talk with you as though you were the only woman in the world who mattered to him at the moment—and, believe me, every gal knows this is a delightful sensation. Eddie could stand before a group of women and sell the Metropolitan Opera to them without any effort whatsoever, just by the force of his terrific personality. The Met never had a better salesman.

Canadian-born Edoardo di Giovanni was singing his young heart out in his fine tenor voice at the Teatro Verdi in Padua, Italy, early in the year 1912 and for five seasons after at La Scala, Milan. Without a doubt he was hoping that a good career lay before him. But did he ever dream that he would become not only a noted tenor and a star of

the Metropolitan Opera Company, but also General Manager of that world famous Opera House? I doubt that.

Edward Johnson, the very same Edoardo di Giovanni of the Teatro Verdi, made his debut with the Met as Avito, in *L'Amore dei Tre Re* on November 16, 1922. From then on he was one of the Met's important tenors. He had already sung with Mary Garden's Chicago Opera Company, with the Ravinia Opera Company, and had been the first Italian Parsifal.

Pelléas was one of Johnson's top roles. With Lucrezia Bori as Mélisande they made a wonderful romantic couple. Some one in the Publicity Department decided to whip up a love-match publicity stunt in connection with their appearances in this opera. It went over big—the public fell for the idea—and you would hear people say: "Oh, they are in love! You can just see it in their acting and hear it in their singing!" Then, they were photographed together quite a bit—all to make the story seem more intriguing. Johnson and Bori also did a magnificent job together in Deems Taylor's opera *Peter Ibbetson*. Johnson was a striking figure in this opera, but he was surely an even more appealing one when he came on the stage as Pelléas in tights which showed to great advantage his very good-looking underpinnings! Yes, their "romance" was the talk of musical circles for some time, but we on the inside really knew that Bori's heart did not belong to Eddie Johnson, nor did Eddie's heart belong to Lucrezia.

Edward Johnson was very well liked as an artist at the Met, not alone because of his distinguished artistry and his excellent voice, but because he was at all times the cultured gentleman, a type of singer Mr. Z. always said every theater needed. He was someone we could all respect and look up to.

So when the Board of Directors chose Edward Johnson

as the new general manager, a great sigh of relief went up all over the Opera House. "Good old Eddie! He won't start swinging the axe!" There's no doubt about it; the season before he took over had been a most trying and worrisome time for everyone, from the sad departure of Gatti-Casazza, through all the unnerving excitement due to the unexpected death of Mr. Witherspoon, who had become general manager after Gatti's resignation; and the period of tension while we all waited for the Board of Directors to make a decision. The poor old Opera House was experiencing a most unusual state of change after Gatti's long reign. Three general managers within a period of a few months! This did not mean deterioration within the Opera House because, of course, Edward Ziegler was sitting behind his desk all the time, running the show as usual.

But until a head was elected there was bound to be a feeling of uncertainty and tension. After all, the good old days when Gatti and Ziegler preferred old employees and familiar faces might be gone forever. Every new head of a concern has some new ideas. The old bromide that a new broom sweeps clean was being quoted all over the house, with many shakes of the head. But Eddie Johnson was well known and loved by all. So we tossed our hats high in the air when the news finally broke that Edward Johnson was to be our new general manager. Well, the only ones who might suffer, we said laughingly, might be the other tenors!

We all read eagerly everything that was being printed. Mr. Ziegler was non-communicative. The name of Lawrence Tibbett was mentioned most frequently in the news. Even in later years, when Mr. Johnson was firm in the driver's seat, I would hear that Eddie was retiring and Tibbett was coming in as general manager. Where did these rumors start, where did they come from so consistently over the years?

Perhaps they were due to some press agent's dream of accomplishing the fact through persistent repetition.

Edward Johnson took pride in his staff, and it made for a pleasant feeling around the Opera House. I remember that soon after he took charge he invited all of us to appear on the stage during a Sunday night concert, and he introduced us to the audience, who gave the staff a rousing hand. Eddie introduced us in groups—the executive staff, the box office, the treasurer's department, the technical department, all the stage groups, the scenic technicians, the electricians, and so on. Since secretaries were a scarcity at the Met in those days (only Luigi Villa and myself), I remember I was introduced in the group with Giuseppe Sturani, the musical secretary, his very able assistant Frank Paola, Luigi Villa, who had been Mr. Gatti's secretary for so many years and was now Mr. Johnson's, and his brother Marino Villa, who took care of all of our advertising. With the exception of Frank Paola, the men in this group were all rather short in stature, and being tall I remember I felt like the Eiffel Tower and tried to shrink down to a less conspicuous height. We had lots of fun that night and everybody concerned thought it was a handsome gesture for Eddie to make. It was a wise one, too, for it served to make each and every one of us more loyal to him.

Mr. Ziegler and Mr. Johnson got on well together. They were in fact devoted friends, though perhaps their relationship did not quite reach the level of deep companionship and understanding which Gatti and Ziegler had shared. Much later on, I felt and heard that outside influences were trying to drive a wedge in somewhere, but I believe the two men remained *en rapport* up to Mr. Ziegler's death.

When Edward Johnson was singing he kept his hair a nice brown shade with a glint of auburn, but when he became general manager, he let his hair go the way of all

flesh. The thick white mop which resulted was most becoming and only made him more attractive than ever. Eddie had a delightful Canadian accent—he was born in Guelph, Ontario, on August 22, 1881—which seemed to me to be more of a slight burr than an English way of speaking. It was just different enough to be attractive.

If Edward Johnson had any faults, I guess it was that he tried to be kind to everyone. In his position this was almost impossible. Mr. Ziegler had learned early to wear his armor openly and to do battle at the first sign of opposition. He did not care a tinker's dam if he was labeled cranky and nasty and mean. There was never anything personal in his belligerency; it was always for the good of the Met. A person of Edward Johnson's temperament found it hard to overcome his innate kindness and to harden himself.

A little incident comes to mind which illustrates Johnson's kindness and his desire to give everybody his due and a boost as well. I was standing in the wings one evening listening to a new singer; the general manager came along and stood there listening too. The tenor finished his aria and made his exit; as he came past us in the very dim lighting in the wings Mr. Johnson clapped him on the back and said: "Bravo! That was splendid!" After a while the manager moved away, and shortly after I found the tenor at my side. He said: "That was darn nice of Johnson. I never had that happen to me before in all my career."

Back in 1912 Edward Johnson had had to go to Italy for experience and for an opportunity, and even had to translate his name into Italian to get a break. He must have regretted then that America had so little to offer aspiring artists. After he became head of the Met, he did everything in his power to open up opportunities for young singers. He promoted the Metropolitan Auditions of the Air and unlocked the doors of the previously hard-to-storm Met for

American artists. Many fine singers have come to notice through these radio auditions, foremost among them being Eleanor Steber, Leonard Warren, Mack Harrell, Margaret Harshaw, Robert Merrill, and Patrice Munsel, but there are many others.

Perhaps this is a good place to say something about the regular auditions at the Met. When I first attended these sessions, they intrigued me so that I would sometimes forego dinner and be late getting home in order not to miss a single one. I never lost my interest, but as time went on I found myself much too busy to be able to stop as often as I wished. But I did go down to one whenever time permitted. The auditions were always held on the main stage, with the auditorium in darkness.

Perhaps you think it was difficult to get an audition at the Met? Not at all. You had only to write a letter; you'd get a reply, a date would be set, and when you arrived the topmen of the Opera House were waiting to hear you. Mr. Gatti, Mr. Ziegler, and Mr. Johnson were wonderfully kind to aspiring young singers. They made them feel at ease and did everything possible to quell nerves and agitation by the calm, friendly, encouraging manner in which they greeted the singers and talked with them. No one was ever made to feel as though the auditioning was just one of those things the management must bear up under. These men had many fine qualities, but I thought their kindness to the naturally anxious and ambitious young singers was one of their best, one which would earn each of them a star in his crown. Johnson and Gatti and Ziegler were really interested in getting for the Met the best voices to be found. So they willingly listened to hundreds of voices each year in order to find the one pure gem.

Of course, all the applicants did not write in for a date. Some would have professional experience already and a

manager acquired along the way. He would obtain an audition as part of his business. Others might be studying through the generosity of some patron of music and the sponsor would ask Mr. Gatti or Mr. Johnson to hear the student. Or a singer might come through the interest of some member of the Board of Directors of the Met. Or we would have a request from a foreign singer trying for the Met, or from a member of an American opera company, like San Francisco's, who would be given as early a date as possible since their qualifications were apt to be known. But usually you could get an audition quite easily by just writing in and asking for one.

After the Auditions of the Air were established under the Johnson management, the system changed and a musical committee was set up to hear the candidates first. I liked the old way best, when students could reach the top men before being screened. It was the custom too, under Mr. Gatti and Mr. Ziegler, to send a letter of thanks to each auditioner. It was a nice custom. So many of them would never hear again from the Met, but they could always show the letter and say, "See? I once auditioned for the Met!"

The letters received from applicants were as varied as the singers who sent them. Like our chorus, the applicants turned out to be of all sizes and shapes. Some of the letters were short notes merely asking for an audition; others were lengthy epistles telling all about the singer, never missing a trick, ending up with what some critic had said. Others gave only pertinent facts regarding training and experience. You could not tell from an application what the voice would turn out to be.

Sometimes a letter would be so full of promise and so interesting that I would make time to go down to the auditorium to hear the candidate. This happened one day and I was startled to find a student, about two years short of

being ready to audition for opera, doing her best with a difficult aria, instead of the well-prepared singer the letter led me to expect. It was evident that someone back of the little girl had been prematurely ambitious for her. On the other hand, a scrawled short note might produce a good voice and an interesting personality. As I said, you never could tell. After all, it was the *voice* that mattered.

Auditions were held in the early evening during the opera season, usually from five to seven o'clock, but in off-season they started at two in the afternoon and often went on for several hours. They were spaced twenty minutes apart and each candidate was asked to sing two songs. As can readily be imagined, auditioners, especially when they were not experienced singers, were often nervous during their first song. The second selection gave a better conception of their qualifications. The singers were permitted to make their own selection of songs and in my time I heard everything from the most difficult of arias to "I Love You Truly," "Mighty Lak a Rose," and "Shortnin' Bread" sung on the Met stage. Some singers whom I heard brought *Lieder* and sang them beautifully too.

The whole musical staff of the Opera House naturally could not be present at auditions, but either Mr. Gatti or Mr. Ziegler, often both of them, attended. Mr. Otto Kahn sometimes came in because of his interest in developing new singers, and perhaps another member of the Board of Directors. There would be a conductor or two, always an assistant conductor who might be needed to accompany an auditioner, and any one else of the musical staff who was available in the house at the time. The piano was used for accompaniments. The singer had the privilege of bringing his own accompanist or could call upon the assistant conductor.

I remember one day when a small stocky Italian was

struggling with an aria. He was awful, he really squawked. He had little voice, was off-key, and had no top at all. But, oh boy, he had plenty of ambition and courage. When he finished Mr. Ziegler thanked him politely, but the man undoubtedly realized he had not done well. He dashed over to the poor assistant conductor who had been having a time of it to accompany the man, and berated him violently and almost threw a punch at him, yelling that the aria had been raised a tone and a half so that he, the singer, could not reach his top notes. "You don't *want* me to win," he shouted hysterically. But an auditioner like that was an exception. I remember that we did have a few indignant letters berating the Met for not answering an application sooner and giving immediate audition dates, but this too happened only once in a long while.

Mr. Gatti and Mr. Ziegler always heard the singers to the end, no matter what they sounded like, no matter how they struggled. They gave them full time and a fair chance and thanked them nicely. The auditions involved a lot of time, work, and expense for the Met, but the management felt well repaid when, as happened every once in a while, an audition produced a beautiful voice and a singer with other qualifications of great promise.

One day a young girl with a lovely voice finished her first aria and Mr. Johnson, who had only recently become our general manager, stepped forward to the orchestra rail to ask her a question. She in turn stepped forward to the edge of the stage to answer him and, with the footlights blinding her and darkness ahead, stepped into the prompter's box and disappeared! Fortunately she was not hurt. She picked herself up and went ahead with her second aria with assurance and in even better voice. Later she received a contract, and undoubtedly the way she met an awkward situation and went on singing so very well was a factor that

counted—a lucky accident. When singers were put under contract they did not appear until the following season, though. The schedule for each Met season is ordinarily all set before the opening night.

No commitment of any kind was ever made to a candidate after an audition; merely a warm thank-you. Mr. Otto Kahn, who was a man of great wealth, was once sued by a young woman who had been given an audition at which he happened to be present. She said that Mr. Kahn told her she was excellent and probably would receive a contract. The management, who alone could decide upon contracts, did not give her one, and she thereupon sued Mr. Kahn. Mr. Gatti and Mr. Ziegler, who had been cautious before, now became unusually noncommittal, and Mr. Johnson continued this tradition.

Eddie Johnson was the Met's general manager from 1935 to 1950, fifteen good years. It was during the Johnson regime that I left the Met in anticipation of a singing career of my own. My friends at the Met gave me a wonderful send-off party—a party that lasted all day. Everyone came up to say good-by, including Frank St. Leger, who had taken over Giuseppe Sturani's position as musical secretary, Mr. Johnson himself, Eric Simon, and many others. The only sad thing for me that day was that Mr. Ziegler did not come to drink to my farewell. But I knew why. He had encouraged me in my hopes and would not hinder my aspirations, but he hated to have me leave his side. I had become a fixture for him and he liked fixtures. I knew he felt bad and I could not blame him for not wanting to say good-by, just as he would not stay to wave a good-by to his dear old friend Gatti-Casazza when he sailed away from America—forever. It was also forever, as it turned out, for my Boss and me, for Mr. Ziegler died before I returned to the Met.

Mr. Johnson, our Eddie, now spends a part of his time in Canada, where his daughter who is married has her home. He also still maintains his New York City apartment. Mrs. Johnson died early in their marriage and her husband never remarried. His eligibility of course only added to the fervor and hopes of the many ladies in all walks of life who adore him. Nowadays he comes to the Opera House, as any dyed-in-the-wool opera addict must, to hear performances. He greets his old friends as warmly and sincerely as ever. I believe no one will ever take Eddie Johnson's place in our hearts!

CHAPTER 13

THE METEOR

TEN thousand people were milling around the Metropolitan Opera House, creating a problem for the police and terrific confusion inside and outside the Met. A year's planned publicity had produced results such as the management had not quite anticipated and which, in the end, was to prove a boomerang. Marion Talley, a little Kansas girl, was making her debut.

There is a song, "Beware, Young Lovers," from *The King and I*, which I always want to paraphrase: "Beware, young singers!" I have seen so many promising careers unfulfilled because sponsors and young singers themselves are too anxious to hasten the day of triumph. To me, Marion Talley was the saddest example, one I can never forget.

Like a meteor out of the blue, a brilliant shooting star to exclaim over and to watch as it rapidly fades from sight, Marion Talley made her debut at the Met as Gilda in *Rigoletto* on the night of Wednesday, February 17, 1926. She was nineteen years of age, and in every way a sweet, unsophisticated young girl.

For more than a year before there had been talk around the town of a wonderful new coloratura and of a coming debut. Rumors and rumors and rumors. To throw a curtain

of mystery about the singer, to arouse curiosity and create suspense, everything about the girl was kept *sub rosa*, while tantalizing little news notes and bits of gossip were released to drift about in the musical air. *A sensation* . . . only a child . . . nothing like it has been heard in years . . . another Patti . . . another Jenny Lind . . . not quite ready . . . but soon, soon, soon.

Talley was studying in New York, chaperoned by her mother and an older sister—very closely chaperoned. She was just a little girl from Kansas City, without experience in music or in anything else.

The management and the more important directors of the Met were often in conference about her progress. The clock was ticking away the hours, the calendar leaves were being torn off. Finally a top-secret and so-important conference was called: Gatti, Ziegler, Otto Kahn, and a few others, but the first three were really the powers-that-were. I heard the discussion about Talley.

"Yes, she could study longer, I agree."

"True, she's very immature, but that will help to make her a sensation."

"Those people out in Kansas are putting pressure on us in several quarters. They are getting impatient."

"We need more full houses."

"Shall we risk it?"

Finally, the decision: "Well, let's debut her. After all she does have a fine voice. When that little girl comes out on the stage and sings as well as she does, it will take them by storm. We'll fill the house this season. Let next season take care of itself."

Perhaps it was a woman's intuition, or the callous way the men discussed Talley, as though she were not a live and lovable little girl, with desires and hopes of her own, Anyway, I was afraid for her. She had studied and practiced

and practiced and studied all through her 'teens, and had done everything she had been told. She reminded me of the doll in *Tales of Hoffmann* (a part she later sang), always being wound up to sing, sing, sing. I could sense the impatience all around the little girl, pushing her: hurry up, hurry up, hurry up.

The decision was that Talley would make her debut as Gilda, and rehearsals were called. At the Opera House a notice was posted: *No one except those directly concerned with the rehearsal to be on or near the stage while Miss Talley is rehearsing.* More hush-hush. Several of us invented reasons to cross the Paint Bridge, forty-two feet above the stage, while the rehearsal was on. We were thrilled as a lovely pure young voice floated up. The girl *did* have a beautiful coloratura—there was quality there.

De Luca was the Rigoletto and he was so kind, so helpful, so considerate of this inexperienced young singer, trying to make her feel as much at ease as possible. I heard him say to her: "Never mind if you cannot hold a phrase, I too will drop it." A fine man and artist.

I'll let Mr. George Buchanan Fife of the *Evening World* of Thursday, February 18, 1926, tell the story of the debut. The center attraction on the front page of the newspaper was a large photograph of Marion Talley, so young-girlish and rather chubby, standing among her floral offerings on the stage of the Met. Under the picture was the newsreport of the debut.

10,000 BATTLE MOUNTED POLICE TO HEAR DEBUT OF 19-YEAR-OLD DIVA

BLASÉ NEW YORK SUPPLEMENTS WELCOME
OF MISS TALLEY'S HOME FOLKS

By George Buchanan Fife

A nineteen-year-old girl from Kansas City held a blasé sophisticated New York audience in the palm of her young hand at the Metropolitan Opera House last night by the youthful charm of her voice.

And not less remarkable than the fact that this girl had done in one step what other stars of the opera had to strive for years to accomplish, was the "old home week" reception she held on the stage after the performance. It was something unprecedented in the history of the Metropolitan, and it lasted until long past the half hour after midnight.

The new star was the much-heralded Marion Talley, who at fifteen had so impressed the guiding spirits of the Metropolitan that at that age she had sown the seeds which blossomed so fully last night. She sang the exacting role of Gilda in Verdi's "Rigoletto" and made a triumph of it.

Continuing on the second page of the newspaper, for another dozen or so paragraphs, Mr. Fife went on to tell about the difficulty in getting tickets into the Opera House, of the mob outside and the troubles of the mounted police in keeping order, of disrupted traffic, of the carload of hometown folks from Kansas City, of Miss Talley's father,

a telegrapher, who had come to hear his daughter sing and to send out the beginning of the story over a specially strung telegraph wire from the Met, of the simple and unaffected new diva, and on and on.

The whole second page of the *Evening World* was mostly about the debut, too. Marion Talley had written her own little piece, copyrighted by the United Press. It is so naive and sincere. How differently a nineteen-year-old diva of today would give a similar interview!

"ALL OVER BEFORE I KNEW IT," MISS TALLEY DECLARES OF METROPOLITAN DEBUT

**DIRECTORS WONDERED TO FIND 19-YEAR-OLD
"GILDA'S" HANDS WARM**

By Marion Talley

I can truthfully say that all day yesterday I didn't feel worried one minute. And I wasn't frightened during the performance. It was all over before I knew it.

Yesterday was the same as any other except that I slept a little later. I got up at 8:30, had breakfast and read a little while. Then I vocalized for ten minutes or so, talked with mother and Florence [Miss Talley's older sister] and had luncheon.

The telephone rang all day but mother wouldn't let me answer it. In the afternoon I practiced again, this time for five minutes, and just wanted to go for a walk but the folks decided I had better not.

Some one told me not to eat supper before I sang, but I was really hungry, and had a meal of eggs, crackers, pineapple and lettuce salad and milk.

Everyone was ready to go to the Metropolitan before I was, and we finally left about 7:15.

Mr. Gatti and Mr. Ziegler came to my dressing room and shook hands with me.

"Why, your hands are warm," they said. Mother smiled and said, "Marion's a funny girl," but I didn't feel at all strange.

I dressed during the first act and went into the wings about five minutes before my cue.

When I walked out on the stage I thought only of two things—the blinding lights and De Luca. I was glad he was there. He has been so wonderful to work with.

After we began our duet I forgot everything except my role. Only once did I think of my singing. That was in "Caro Nome." When I heard Rigolettos in Italy I would always catch my breath at sopranos singing Gilda. I had a vision that I was listening to somebody else, but then the performance moved on, and I lost myself in it.

The applause was kind. Every one has been good to me.

I only hope that the nice things my Kansas City friends and Mr. Kahn have said will come true. I am grateful.

Across the top of the second page of the paper was a row of six photographs, all famous singers: Calvé, Patti, Sembrich, Nordica, Rosa Ponselle, and Mary Garden. Underneath, the caption was:

**OPERA STARS OF FIRST MAGNITUDE WHO
WON ACCLAIM IN YOUTHFUL DEBUTS**

**TALLEY SHARES HONORS WITH PATTI AND
CALVÉ IN SINGING AT EARLY AGE**

The *Evening World* had certainly featured Marion Talley's debut as *the* news of the day and had set her among the great stars of opera.

For a while everything was fine. The critics were delighted with the purity and flexibility of Talley's voice, and continually called attention to her youthfulness and naiveté. Everybody wanted to see and hear her. The Met was selling out the house and the management was happy. Talley was singing Philine in *Mignon*, Gilda in *Rigoletto*, Olympia in *Tales of Hoffmann*, all the usual coloratura roles, to the delight of thousands of operagoers.

The new sensation at the Met was being feted and flattered and pampered and in constant demand for appearances outside the Met. After the great insistence upon keeping her youthful, unspoiled, and constantly protected, Talley was supposed to grow suddenly into a well-poised, well-adjusted womanhood.

Talley went on studying, of course, but now from all sides came suggestions: "Study with so-and-so." "Oh, my dear, no, you should be with Madame X." "Maestro Z is the *only* one for you!" Important people were giving advice and the singer and her mother were trying to please.

Marcella Sembrich was at that time one of the most important voice teachers in New York, having retired from her own active career. I have heard many and varied opinions from professional singers who studied with her. Some thought she was tops, no one like her; others felt she had done nothing for them. Sembrich was very highly revered by the directors of the Opera House, and she was a particular favorite of the then dean of music critics, W. J. Henderson. So, eventually, Talley was sent to Sembrich. I do not know what happened between them. My guess has always been that Talley was among those who did not think Sembrich infallible and she must have offended her.

At any rate, Talley left Sembrich and went on to another voice teacher. Daily rumors flashed back to the Met, among them one that Sembrich had told Henderson at length about the difficulties she had had with Talley. Since Henderson was an admirer of Sembrich's art and a good friend, he naturally would take her part.

Marion Talley was singing regularly, and the Opera House was still packed at her performances. She had her full quota of curtain calls and bravas and enthusiasm. I would hear the steady clapping and shouting the night before, yet the morning papers began to print critical reviews tearing Talley's performance and voice to tiny bits. They spared her nothing and Henderson was the cruelest of them all. Nothing had changed but the critics' charitable point of view, as far as I could see and hear. Henderson, the dean of music, had cast the first stone, and the others followed his lead.

Only three years after her debut, with a new season to plan for, the management was hemming and hawing about re-engaging Talley. It was obvious that the critics would continue to be unmerciful. Yet the singer was still drawing crowded houses and there was every reason to believe that with more maturity the voice would be more glorious. Gatti and Ziegler and Otto Kahn decided to be cagey. Talley would be offered a limited contract for the coming season. As long as she filled the house she was good box-office and they wanted her. With fewer roles to sing, the critics would have less space in which to crucify her. It might work. So a limited contract was drawn and Talley came in to see Mr. Ziegler.

To his surprise she settled the matter herself by stating at once that she had decided not to sing at the Met another season, but to devote herself to study and to concert work. The gentlemen of the management didn't like that at all.

If there was any firing to be done they preferred to do it. It was astonishing to them that Talley had thought this thing through for herself. She was nearly four years older than the night she had made her debut, and perhaps she had grown up inside without too many being aware of the change.

So this sweet, nice young girl, with the lovely voice and wonderful prospects, who had had ten thousand customers battling to enter the Opera House to hear her sing, slipped quietly away from the Met.

Every conductor I talked with about Marion Talley said the same thing to me. Talley was an intelligent girl fundamentally, had a truly lovely voice, memorized readily, responded to suggestions, and as far as any of them could see ought to have had a long and fine career in opera. Nearly everyone agreed that she had been rushed too soon into a career, that she would have developed in voice and personality with further study and more time to mature.

The newspapers followed Talley for a while. She made a film, unsuccessfully. She had fallen in love with her voice teacher, had married. A bit of news here and there, and then she faded from public notice here in the East.

I often think of Talley's lovely voice when I hear some of those put under contract today, and I still feel regret for the fate that shattered her career at the Met. To my thinking, spite had ended her operatic career.

I have a record of Marion Talley singing the brilliant coloratura polonaise, "*Je suis Titania*," from *Mignon*, which I put on my phonograph sometimes and play for remembrance and for pure enjoyment. The quality in the voice is there even on my old, well-worn record.

CHAPTER 14

THE GREAT SURPRISE

BANG! went the door one January afternoon in 1935, and there stood the usually calm, dry Bodanzky in the open doorway, electrified with excitement. His eyes were popping and his arms cutting the air as though he were still conducting.

"My God, Ned! My God! Come hear this woman sing!" He turned and dashed back toward the auditorium, Mr. Ziegler hot on his trail. I could not resist. I followed too.

Bodanzky's excitement had me a-twitter, and even Mr. Ziegler's staid and dignified back ahead of me seemed to exude the same anticipation as he hurried along in unusual haste. This must be *something*, I said to myself, for it was not Bodanzky's habit to come running for Mr. Z. A messenger usually brought the request when a conductor needed my Boss in the auditorium.

The discovery of a new great voice at the Met is as electric and as nerve-tingling as the mining of a new Koh-i-noor or the unveiling of a great masterpiece. Perhaps the very time-limitation on a voice makes this particular work of art more precious to those who are first privileged to thrill to its beauty.

The familiar music of *Götterdämmerung* filled the air as

we opened the door. Mr. Ziegler slipped quietly into a seat and I stood at the rear of the auditorium—spellbound. A woman was standing on the stage. Great round golden luscious tones poured out with ease, filling the huge space of the auditorium with magnificent sound. A voice made for Wagner's music—or wasn't the music made for such a voice, rather? At any rate, here was the happiest of combinations.

The singer was undoubtedly a Scandinavian—too fair in coloring and tall in stature to be anything else. She stood relaxed, unemotional, her hands clasped loosely. None of the usual tenseness, wetting of lips, tightened throat muscles, or other symptoms of nervousness so often found in first rehearsals. Such simplicity and poise—so very effective. I could not take my eyes from her and I am sure my ears were standing straight out from my head to catch every note. So it was that I heard for the first time the Norwegian singer, Kirsten Flagstad, the greatest dramatic soprano of her day.

I was dying to know the effect upon my Boss, so I tiptoed down the aisle and took a quick look at him. Just as I had expected, he was so absorbed that I doubted if a clanging fire-engine driving into the foyer of the Metropolitan would have disturbed him. Wagner was Mr. Ziegler's dish and it was being served to him at its best. The few of us who were there that day will never forget the thrill of hearing this gift of the Gods so unexpectedly revealed.

Back in the office, my bewildered Boss was so keyed up that he strode back and forth across the room, giving me a critical analysis of the voice, extolling its beauty, asking me if I had noticed this phrasing and that interpretation. Finally, Mr. Ziegler calmed down enough to sit at his desk and asked me to get some of the directors on the phone. Being the astute manager that he was, three little words were un-

doubtedly dancing before his eye: *Good Box Office*. A voice like that meant full houses. As always with Mr. Ziegler, it was difficult to tell which was paramount: the joy of discovering a great singing star, or the financial returns for the Met. After all, nothing in the world but cold cash kept the Metropolitan Opera a going concern, and recently, with ever mounting expenses, cash had not been too plentiful.

It seemed that utter confusion reigned the next few days after this first Flagstad rehearsal. Directors were asking: "Where has this voice been all this time? Why didn't any of our agents hear about it?" (I myself had been wondering what had happened to our ear-to-the-ground boys.)

"Why was she engaged only as a replacement artist? Why didn't someone know she could *sing* like this?" This was the kind of talk I remember going on all day when Messrs. Gatti, Ziegler, and Bodanzky got together to discuss the astonishing event, and the necessary change in plans and contract.

Eric Simon, at that time the Met's European representative, was called in. "Yes, of course, I remember that we invited Mme. Flagstad to come to St. Moritz to sing for us. But you'll remember that the audition was held in a room—a rather small room." Mr. Gatti and Mr. Bodanzky had both been present at that audition. They had not been especially impressed, as Mr. Gatti had written to Mr. Ziegler. It had been the consensus of opinion of Mr. Gatti, the veteran impresario of the Metropolitan Opera House; of Mr. Bodanzky, the well-known Wagnerian conductor; and of Mr. Simon, experienced Metropolitan Opera agent, that the voice they heard that day in St. Moritz was good enough for secondary parts, or to replace if necessary such a singer as Frida Leider, then leading Wagnerian soprano

at the Met. It makes one wonder about auditions. There are times when even the top experts can be wrong.

That Flagstad had been engaged as a secondary artist was never mentioned again. It was a secret to keep under the family hat. It was not until Flagstad's great voice burst forth upon Bodanzky's astonished ears in all its glory and in the big auditorium, that the Met realized what a whopping Christmas present sly old Santa had dropped down our chimney.

One day, weeks after Flagstad's debut, Mr. Ziegler called me to his office. When I got there I found Bodanzky and Mr. Simon sitting there. "Miss Klaffky, we have been having a discussion, and I wish you would go through your files, I can't tell you what year, possibly five years ago, and see if you can find any letter which Mr. Kahn wrote to me from abroad and in which he suggested someone go to Norway to hear Flagstad sing. Personally," he went on, "I can't recall such a letter, but Mr. Simon thinks Mr. Kahn wrote to me to this effect."

It was quite a hunt, searching for the letter, and took so long that my Boss telephoned twice to my room to see what progress I was making. They were getting impatient. Finally I did find the letter in the 1930 files. Just a short sentence penned by Mr. Kahn from abroad: "It might be worth while for someone to hear a soprano who is singing in Norway by the name of Kirsten Flagstad." Nothing more and not enough to provoke action. It was to be five years before Flagstad came to the Met.

Kirsten Flagstad made her debut as Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* on February 2, 1935. Next morning we raced for the papers to read the reviews. They were even more laudatory than we had expected. The Met had a great new star and everybody was happy, especially the box office. But Flagstad's second performance at the Met was the one that

made the town really sit up and take notice. The opera was *Tristan und Isolde* on February 6, and her Isolde was to become her most popular role and the one that audiences demanded with regularity.

I am reminded of the many times I used to stand in the wings to listen to Flagstad's thrilling rendition of the "Liebestod" at the end of the opera. Many, many times I would turn, as the golden curtain was slowly closing, to find my Boss standing in the wings next to me. We couldn't speak and invariably tears would be rolling down our cheeks. The next day he would always mention something about the performance.

"We stand so close, and still you cannot see that woman breathe!" he would marvel. "How does she sustain such long and difficult phrases?" And then again he might say: "She is just as fresh at the end of the opera as she was at the beginning!" We talked of Flagstad only in exclamations.

Another incident comes to mind in connection with this opera. Several years after Flagstad's debut, on another night when she was again scheduled to sing Isolde, I was crossing the stage just a few minutes before curtain time. Alfred Mapleson, our music librarian, suddenly came dashing past, almost knocking me over.

"Sorry, Helen, out of the way, please! Flagstad wants this score of *Tristan*, says she has forgotten a part of the opera!" There was Alfred running as fast as he could to get to Flagstad's dressing room, so that she might have a few minutes to look at the score. A sudden lapse of memory—which can happen to the greatest of singers.

Teamed with Lauritz Melchior, the great Danish tenor, Flagstad returned German opera to the Met stage as a paying proposition. Wagner was tops again. During and after the first World War German opera had been in natural disfavor. Now that was past and forgotten and once again

Brünnhilde rode triumphantly across the Met stage. No longer did we have to press free tickets upon our friends to ensure a good audience for *Tristan* and for *Götterdämmerung*. The overwhelming and enthusiastic critical praise after each performance sung by Flagstad and Melchior changed the situation almost overnight. Now it was a great favor if members of the staff received complimentary tickets. We stood up in the wings or out front with other opera devotees. The box office manager smiled like the proverbial Cheshire cat and the directors threw a collective top-hat into the air. Flagstad settled down to an undisputed reign as the Wagnerian queen of the Metropolitan Opera House.

Toward the end of November, 1938, Flagstad told Mr. Ziegler that she wanted to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of her first singing engagement. (Since Flagstad did not make her debut at the Met until 1935, this meant that she had been singing in Europe for over twenty years before her tremendous success here.) Flagstad said that she wanted to give a party for everyone—she stressed that—for *everyone* from top to bottom, from the manager to the newest porter or cleaning woman. She also insisted that it be a completely private affair. No outsiders, no press, no pictures, no publicity. Edwin McArthur, Flagstad's accompanist, took charge and I remember that he asked me to give him a list of every single employee in the house, so that no one would be overlooked.

One of the managers said to me in his usual gruff way: "It will be a hell of a party with everyone in this place attending." As it turned out, it *was* a hell of a party, a wonderful party! The management was broken-hearted because we had to pass up such favorable newspaper notices and publicity, but Madam was paying the bill and it was to be her way or not at all. The invitations went out im-

mediately and there was a buzz of excitement from the boiler room to the roof stage.

Many of our staff lived out of town and evening dresses had to be carried in. There was a long procession of suitcases passing into the Opera House the morning of December 12, and then a scurry to find a vacant room or unused spot to hang up evening dresses and finery. There must have been a run on coiffeur shops, too, for every gal had a fresh hairdo. This was a special occasion, the first inclusive gathering of the Met family to celebrate the singing-birthday of one of the greatest living singing artists. Every Tom, Dick, and Harry, every Mary, Jane, and Susie of us were there that night, and all in our best array.

Sherry's big restaurant room was a lovely sight. The huge scintillating chandeliers were ablaze, the wall mirrors reflected gleaming white linen, silver, wine glasses, the great colorful bunches of flowers that filled tall vases about the room, and the small crystal bowls on the tables. Following Mme. Flagstad's orders the food and wine was to be of the best, and plentiful. How Sherry's loved to carry out an order like that! One long table had been set up for the hostess and the more important guests from the management and the artists. Innumerable small round tables were placed around the room where all the rest of us would sit as we pleased.

Just before midnight the restaurant filled with guests, awaiting Flagstad's arrival. She entered soon after, escorted by Edward Johnson and Mr. Ziegler. She wore a lovely all-white gown and simple jewelry. As soon as we saw her we burst into "Happy Birthday, dear Madam," with a million dollars worth of the best voices in the world singing it. The women artists were all wearing their best gowns and handsomest jewelry. They looked beautiful, reflected in the glittering wall mirrors.

At a nod from Flagstad, Sherry's well-trained waiters started serving dinner, an endless procession of delicious dishes presented over and over again. Corks started popping all over the room and champagne was poured into our glasses. It flowed readily and freely from midnight until daybreak when the party finally ended. Somewhere around two A.M. the waiters brought in a huge four-tier birthday cake, handsomely decorated. It was set before Flagstad and she inserted a silver knife and cut a slice. Mr. Ziegler then undertook to serve it and it was with many *oh's* and *ah's* of excitement and alarm that we watched him balance piece after piece and, by sheer luck, transfer them to the waiting plates. Finally he gave up and Sherry's waiters finished the job.

Mr. Ziegler was in a wonderful mood that night. He was as happy as I had seen him in years, and so were we all. Flagstad had brought us together as a family and never had we been so royally treated. It was a night we would all remember. I looked across to the table where our porters, dressed in their Sunday best, sat and enjoyed themselves, waited upon by Sherry's best men. I knew they would long remember this night.

At one point in the evening, or rather, the morning, someone (I can only remember it was a man) had a happy idea. With one of those huge champagne bottles (a magnum) in hand, he made the rounds of the big table collecting autographs on the label pasted on the bottle. A dozen others began to make the rounds also. I saw one bottle that was a real collector's item, it had so many important autographs upon it. But as the gaiety and time went on, most of the bottles were forgotten, and where they ended up I shall never know. Only Joe Mackie of our box office staff still had his the next day. Later Joe left the Met to study for the ministry and now has a church down south, so I hear. I

wonder if he saved his autographed champagne bottle as a memento of gayer days in New York and of a wonderful party given by a great artist and gracious hostess.

It probably will surprise many of Flagstad's admirers to learn that she was not well known as a Wagnerian artist before her American debut. She had sung *Tristan und Isolde* in Europe, but she was better known for her roles in Italian operas, especially *Tosca*, and she had even sung in operetta. Her great musical ability was evidenced when she actually learned the three Brünnhilde roles—in *Siegfried*, *Die Walküre*, *Götterdämmerung*—in only eight weeks, and sang them here for the first time in her career. The same was true of Kundry in *Parsifal*, which she learned in eleven days, an astonishing musical feat! Perhaps if she had not come to America she might never have been known as the greatest Wagnerian soprano of her day, might never have developed the roles that were her great forte. Perish the thought!

One season the management tried to get her to sing *Norma*. We all thought she would be magnificent in that role. She studied it here for a while, then auditioned it for the powers-that-be at the Met, and the consensus then among the management who heard her was that she was doing an excellent job and should keep on with it during the summer. However, while she was abroad she cabled back that she had decided the role was not for her and that she did not wish to do it. This was a disappointment, I know, to the management, but I believe Flagstad well knew the limitations of her voice and that if the role had not proved a success for her she might have lost a great deal of prestige. Throughout her career she showed a lot of common sense about such things, unlike some other prima donnas.

It always seemed to me that Flagstad was surprised at

the tremendous and immediate acclaim which came to her at the Met, and later throughout the country—surprised and grateful. As a gesture of appreciation, Mr. Ziegler told me, Flagstad had expressed a desire to aid a young American musician. Such a young man, Edwin McArthur, had become her personal accompanist. It was McArthur's ambition to become a conductor and Flagstad undertook to help him. He studied with Bodanzky and other conductors. Many a time I saw McArthur backstage at the Met, watching the conducting of a rehearsal or a performance through the assistant conductor's peephole, waving his arms in practice and going through all the motions and emotions of conducting. Coming upon him suddenly backstage you might think it a foolish pantomime. He was so serious and determined and so completely absorbed that the boys backstage—the mechanics and scenic men—used to get a kick out of his performance and, unbeknownst to the embryo conductor, used to imitate him. All in a day's fun backstage at the Met, and without any ill will.

Mr. Johnson and Mr. Ziegler were adamant about Flagstad's repeated requests for McArthur to conduct for her. They were not willing to establish a precedent under which an artist might demand whatever conductor he or she preferred. One day Mr. Ziegler, after another one of these sessions with Flagstad, called me to his office. I think he had to blow off steam to someone. He looked exhausted and was undoubtedly very upset. He said to me: "Did you see that woman go out of here?" I had, of course, and knew he meant Flagstad. "There," he continued, "goes the most stubborn woman I have ever had to deal with in all my years here."

It was natural that this unpleasant situation should arouse antagonism on both sides and many things were said which might better had been left unsaid. I thought of dear old Dr. Damrosch, who would walk into my office and say:

"Forgive me, Miss Klaffky, I have a confession to make. 'I have done those things which I ought not to have done and have left undone those things which I ought to have done.' What do I do about it now?" Dr. Damrosch could give me days of extra work because of something he forgot to do, and I should never have minded. He was forgiven before he asked.

Flagstad finally broke down the resistance of the management to some extent and they did permit McArthur to conduct a performance of *Tristan und Isolde* with Flagstad singing Isolde. But this was unfortunate because it only deepened and widened the chasm between the management and the star, the management feeling they had been forced into an untenable and regrettable situation. It became evident to all of us at the Met that a break must soon be reached, that their differences were beyond healing. Mr. Johnson and Mr. Ziegler even ceased to make the traditional courtesy call of the management to the star's dressing room before each performance. This was almost akin to publishing an advertisement of a separation between husband and wife.

Another concession the management made was to permit McArthur to conduct a *Tristan* performance in Philadelphia. Mr. Ziegler, following his custom, had gone over to Philly for the performance. I was naturally curious to know how the performance had gone and asked him upon his return. He turned on me with a flushed face and said gruffly: "How the hell do you think it went? Don't you think our orchestra men know how to play *Tristan*?" To which I wisely answered nothing and went about my business.

However, Flagstad still kept up this demand for McArthur as conductor whenever she sang and during the tour in Boston she suddenly announced she would not sing the performance scheduled unless McArthur conducted.

Whereupon the management again bowed to her demands.

At the end of that season Kirsten Flagstad, so long the reigning dramatic soprano and star at the Met, suddenly announced that in spite of the war she was going home to Norway to be with her husband. There was no mention of another season or of future plans on either side. Flagstad sang what she and the management must have thought would be her final performance, and shortly afterward Flagstad sailed quietly for Europe. Before her were to be the tragic years and suffering that engulfed her after World War II.

Of the true facts and sad events which clouded Flagstad's life toward the end and after World War II, I knew nothing except what I read in the newspapers: that her husband was accused of collaboration with the Nazis, was arrested, imprisoned and died in prison; and that Flagstad herself was supposed to have sung for Hitler's Nazis. There were naturally rumors and rumors at the Met about Flagstad but no facts to substantiate them. She had always seemed to be very much in love with her husband and often spoke with regret of their necessary separations when she was under contract to the Met, and he had to stay in Norway because of business commitments. I believe she was stubbornly loyal to her husband, and I feel she must have suffered deeply—and silently.

When the dark clouds of doubt and suspicion had rolled by and the skies had more or less cleared for her, Kirsten Flagstad returned to the Metropolitan Opera House to new triumphs under a new management. Her first return engagement was sung on the night of January 22, 1951, in *Tristan und Isolde*. I crowded into a packed house to hear her, and the voice seemed more glorious than I had remembered. The audience was thrilled and enthusiastic, and so was I. But ghosts of the past kept intruding. I saw Mr.

Ziegler and myself standing in the wings with tears in our eyes after the "Liebestod." I heard him say: "How does she sustain tones so beautifully!" Surely here was a remarkable woman as well as a great artist.

These thoughts were with me as I listened to Flagstad sing once again. She sang as splendidly as ever, she looked just the same. But what, I wondered, were her thoughts and feelings and recollections as she stepped once more upon the big stage? It was not possible to guess and no one would have dared to ask. I heard everywhere that Flagstad had returned to America with a coat of armor wrapped about her, that she was withdrawn and unapproachable even to old friends at the Met.

Mr. Ziegler was dead and Mr. Johnson's tenure as general manager had ended. A whole new regime had taken over and new faces were everywhere in the old Opera House. Perhaps Flagstad felt a satisfaction in this, a kind of vindication.

The music of *Tristan* went on and Flagstad's great voice filled the auditorium with golden sound just as it had done the first time I had heard her sing, some fifteen years ago, in happier days. I felt sure that Mr. Ziegler's spirit was there, too.

CHAPTER 15

GLAMOUR GIRLS AND DON JUANS

GLAMOUR! What is glamour? I remember being in our scenic artist's room one day when Joseph Novak was painting a picture of one of our most glamorous sopranos. I said: "My, she is beautiful." But Mr. Novak replied, "Yes, Helen, to you she may be beautiful. But for me she is like many a singer; she leaves me absolutely cold. Helen, beauty must be something that satisfies. As you look at this picture and find something in this face that satisfies you, then to you it is beauty. To me her face is too artificial; it is glamour you see, not beauty." Yet it is a great asset for any singer to possess this elusive quality.

It always interested me when reading publicity about the glamorous stars of the Met to find that this "credit line" was attributed to so few stars, considering that possibly eighty or more female artists are on the roster each season. We always heard plenty about Grace Moore, Lily Pons, Gladys Swarthout—as our glamour girls. And they *were* glamorous. Following in Farrar's footsteps they started the glamour girl era at the Met.

Grace Moore was chic, assured, and glamorous even when she arrived. She had been an established star on Broad-

way. She knew how to dress, how to use makeup to best advantage, how to take the spotlight. And she certainly knew how to act in movies. Just recently, in a discussion with one of the powers-that-be at the Met today, he said that he thought Hollywood ought to rerun some of the Grace Moore pictures and perhaps they would then remember how to make a good musical with an opera star as the lead. How true! I'll never forget Grace Moore's big picture *One Night of Love*, and also *New Moon* in which she costarred with Lawrence Tibbett.

The first time I ever heard her sing was my first year at the Met when the Actors Equity put on a huge benefit performance in which Grace Moore sang Irving Berlin's then current hit *What'll I Do?* After that we heard little of her until Otto Kahn began writing from Europe to the effect that Grace was hard at work preparing for opera and that he hoped either Gatti or Ziegler would try to hear her when they came to Europe. Her debut was as Mimi in *La Bohème* on February 7, 1928, with our own Edward Johnson as the Rodolfo. A carload of friends from Tennessee arrived to help make this debut a gala event. Actually Grace Moore was not too successful in her first years at the Met. She finally left the House to go into movies, and from then on she really zoomed. Mrs. Lawrence Townsend of Washington, who had a real interest in Grace Moore from her youth, kept writing to my Boss informing him that Grace had now married, had settled down, was really quite sincere about her work, and—the usual—wanted to come back to the Met. When she did come back she really began to do some beautiful singing and acting, and was constantly climbing until her tragic death in 1946. Yes, Grace Moore was already an established glamour girl, unlike Swarthout and Pons.

Gladys Swarthout came from Chicago, and I well re-

member her debut as La Cieca in *La Gioconda*. She seemed just another little girl with a beautiful voice but she had great possibilities. It was not long before someone began glamorizing her and she bloomed into an extremely handsome young woman. She became one of the best-dressed stars at the Opera House. I remember too how well she looked in tights in the role of Siébel in *Faust* or as Stephano in *Romeo et Juliette*—all extremely important assets. She soared to fame quickly with her fine mezzo voice. Too bad that television was only in the making when Swarthout made herself and the Prudential Hour known coast to coast via radio.

As a contrast to the quiet, almost plain little girl, unknown to New York, who first came to the Met, I remember an incident Flossie Morton, at the information desk, told me about Swarthout. A rehearsal was going on and Swarthout had been out front listening. She passed by Flossie's desk on her way out and reported to Flossie that she had mislaid her bag somewhere in the auditorium. "It didn't have much in it," Swarthout said, "only a couple of hundred dollars. I don't care about the money, but I would like to have my compact back."

Flossie gave a good hearty laugh and said: "All right, if I find it I'll see you get the compact back but I will keep the money."

Success does change one's idea of values. How often have I seen this happen when the modest newcomer becomes a great star. Mink and money can do wonders for any gal! But as Flossie always used to say: "Well, Helen, we knew them when..."

One day someone phoned me: "Helen, do come on down and hear this little French girl right away." I knew that Maria Gay had interested the management in a French

coloratura, but very few of us had heard anything other than that. Perhaps the Talley fiasco was the reason there was no advance press, or perhaps the management had decided to go easy since it had been proved a number of times that no manager can really foretell what success a young artist may have. I dropped what I was doing and hurried down to the auditorium in time to see a tiny little girl, looking no more than sixteen and only a speck on the big stage. She was dressed in a rather plain but good-looking business suit and was singing the Mad Scene from *Lucia* as I had never heard it sung before. There she was, this tiny, adorable child, hitting high *f*'s with so little effort that you felt she could soar even higher whenever she pleased. Not only that—she was doing vocal acrobatics with such ease and agility, and such breath control! Well, hearing Lily Pons for the first time was one of the special diamonds in my own horseshoe of memories at the Met. I was thrilled as were all of us who were listening to that rehearsal. Lily Pons had arrived in America and there was no doubt that the Met had a wonderful new star. Pons's knowledge of English was slight and poor then. She was diffident but cute because of her size and straight black hair, and not a bit like the glamorous Lily with the vivid personality and gorgeous clothes of today.

I said she looked sixteen and so she did, but actually Pons was already a married woman when she came to the Met. Her debut brought the house down as expected; Lily was "in," and she has sung to crowded houses from that day to this. Those high *f*'s are still the envy of every other coloratura! And so Lily remained no *pêche Melba*, but the *lily supreme* of coloraturas for many years. Some critics have said she wasn't always on pitch, but to me she has remained one of the most satisfying of high sopranos. She always gives a good performance and delivers the top notes, which

is what we expect from these most exotic birds in the operatic aviary.

The romance between Lily Pons and André Kostelanetz, the noted orchestra leader, delighted and interested us all at the Opera House. It seemed to me as though Kostelanetz came to every rehearsal he could get to when Pons was singing, and I have seen him many times standing in the rear of the house with a score in his hand, following every note his Lily was singing. So intent was he that he seemed unaware there was anyone but Lily and André in the big house. He was undoubtedly a fine mentor as well as suitor, and he has done much to help her in a great career.

Risë Stevens, another acknowledged glamour girl, came along in more recent years, before I left the Met. I remember her singing in a rehearsal of *Der Rosenkavalier* when first I heard her, dressed in a very plain cloth dress, just as though she might be going to a class in high school. "My, Mr. Ziegler, that is a lovely voice," I remarked to my Boss when I got back to the office. "Yes," he said, "and she's really quite a wonderful kid." Yes, she had youth, good looks, and most important of all a good voice and acting ability. She was a good friend of our general manager, Edward Johnson, and she always seemed to be quite assured and at home on the Met stage. Risë Stevens has gone a long way since that first rehearsal. Movies, radio programs and now TV—success all along the line—and she is still growing. Mr. Ziegler always amused me when he called her "Legs" Stevens. He got that from the fact that she had so many parts in which she had to show her legs, and Mr. Z. had great fun kidding her about this fact.

Then I remember the day when first the lovely Jarmila Novotna came to the Met for an interview with Mr. Ziegler.

My office phone rang and Mr. Ziegler said: "Miss Klaffky, would you please come to my office?" When I arrived in his office I sat down prepared to take dictation. Mr. Ziegler sat at his desk but said not a word to me. Finally I said: "Didn't you ask me to come down?" He replied: "Yes, stay here for a few moments. Someone is coming to the office and I want you to look at this person and tell me if you have ever seen more piercing blue eyes." "What a funny assignment," said I. "But sure, I'll stay. Who is it?"

My Boss didn't answer me, so I just sat until finally the door opened and in walked Arturo Toscanini and Jarmila Novotna. I forgot to look at Novotna at first; I was so completely taken up with Toscanini. He sat directly opposite me. Every time I looked at him, I found him looking at me—until we both kind of smiled at each other and I began to feel rather stupid and thought I should leave the room. In telling Mr. Ziegler of this later, he said: "Well, you can rest assured if ever he meets you again he will know you, for he has a remarkable memory for faces." And, incidentally, he has the most remarkable *gray-blue* eyes. I do remember looking at Novotna in between his glances, and thought her a very beautiful woman and beautifully dressed. I also remember that it wasn't very long after this interview that Novotna joined the Met opera forces! Another real glamour girl!

Then there were Lotte Lehmann and Elisabeth Rethberg, who possessed two of the finest soprano voices I heard at the Met early in my career—in the days before Flagstad and Traubel. Both had glamour, too. Lotte Lehmann always gave a thrilling performance. Who can ever forget her Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* or her Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*? As for her Marchallin in *Der Rosenkavalier*, I have not yet heard another portrayal of the role to equal hers in

artistry and excitement and in voice. She was truly one of the great.

Elisabeth Rethberg was a remarkable dramatic soprano, a glorious Aïda, and wonderful too in Wagnerian roles. She, like Geraldine Farrar, was literally worshiped backstage and the chorus particularly adored her. Her splendid voice and great dramatic ability, and her warm graciousness off the stage made the chorus consider her all that a great operatic star should be. They loved her so that they would almost tear apart anyone who dared to suggest that she was less than perfect. Who can forget her Agathe in *Der Freischütz*, her Desdemona in *Othello*? Yes, one of the most beautiful voices ever heard at the Met, and loved by everyone! The affection of the chorus, the ballet, and the men backstage is always a good gauge of a singer's true worth.

Lehmann—Rethberg—Ponselle—Flagstad—Traubel: *what voices to remember!* Give me a big luscious voice like any of these and I can listen forever and forever.

There were many more: Helen Jepson, as gorgeous a blonde as one would ever want to see; Rose Bampton, a truly beautiful woman; Lucielle Browning, young and beautiful, with a good voice and who, also, could wear tights as prettily as Swarthout any day; Bidu Sayao—I always felt that if Sayao had had the top notes that Pons had, she might have given our Lily a tremendous run as the Met's leading coloratura. Sayao has a beautiful voice and is an accomplished artist, is charming on the stage, and always gives a most satisfying performance. And while talking about glamour and beauty who can ever forget the very beautiful Greta Stückgold and Maria Müller, and many more. Yes, there were and are many glamorous gals at the Met; unfortunately a great many of them were never publicized.

* * *

But what about our men—surely they can't be called "glamor boys." I shall call them Don Juans, the men women just love. Heading this list my mind immediately goes to Ezio Pinza, our great basso, who more or less deserted the opera for Broadway and fame in *South Pacific*, then went to Hollywood and into the movies, and is now in television. I wish I had a dime for every time I have had a woman say to me: "I'm simply crazy about Pinza." Yes, all of us backstage have heard the women rave. Well, it all made for good business for Pinza and for the Met. I can never think of Pinza, however, without thinking of the days when he and Rethberg were working out the details of the joint-recital programs they were about to launch. Many rehearsals were needed. Pinza's first wife, who made very few personal appearances at the Opera House, would constantly keep calling and she would always ask: "Is Pinza there?" Miss Barry, the telephone operator, would then call me and ask: "Helen, are Pinza and Rethberg up there practicing?" You guessed it: the answer to Mrs. Pinza invariably was: "No, he isn't here," or sometimes, "Yes, he is very busy rehearsing." What an efficient secretary and telephone operator!

After the Pinzas separated, however, Ezio Pinza really put one over on us—including Miss Harding who always knows what is going on in her ballet—by marrying one of our nicest ballet girls. No one knew this romance was flourishing, and therefore the whole Opera House was truly surprised and delighted. Doris Pinza is without doubt one of the most charming girls who ever danced at the Met, and to this day Miss Curtis, Miss Harding, and I often talk of her.

Then there was the jovial Giovanni Martinelli, one of our most wonderful dramatic Italian tenors, and for years the mainstay of the dramatic tenor side of the house. He had a very faithful secretary in Gino Castro, who took care of

the great singer and all the major and minor details of his life, and rescued him whenever Martinelli's good heart and gay manners got him in a trifle too deep.

The management had a sort of special telephone system in the Opera House whereby we could always hear in all of the offices the performance going on on the stage. This is called a "stroger," I believe. At all events, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Ziegler could keep one ear on the opera and the other on business-as-usual. One day while in Mr. Ziegler's office, both my Boss and I were working and listening at the same time to a performance going on in which Martinelli was giving forth with all the fervor of his Italian heart and all the beauty of his great voice. My Boss said jokingly and with a twinkle in his eye: "Just listen to that Romeo carrying on! You know, he's been yelling like that all his life." I knew of course that Mr. Ziegler was only being facetious and that he was very fond of Martinelli.

I had to pass Martinelli's dressing room in order to get to my office. One day as I was approaching the dressing room after a performance in which he had appeared, I heard a tremendous racket going on—I think I can say without exaggeration that it sounded very much to me as though a pitched battle was taking place in his room. Well, as I got near the door, suddenly one of Martinelli's shoes went flying past my face. It just missed me, thank goodness. Without even batting an eyelash I walked right on into my office. However, I called Mr. Z. on the phone and told him a battle royal between two women seemed to be going on in Martinelli's dressing room and I also told him of the flying shoe. To which he calmly replied: "Congratulations, I am glad you escaped!" I remembered what he had said to me years before: Keep your eyes shut, your ears shut, and your mouth shut. But he had never warned me of flying shoes! I learned afterward that it was only a friendly argument

going on between two women, one of whom was a little French actress!

Lawrence Tibbett came to the Met very young and unknown, and had a slow time for a while. Then in one performance he zoomed to the top. And that performance was *Falstaff* and with what a cast: Besides Tibbett, there were Frances Alda, Lucrezia Bori, Marion Telva, Beniamino Gigli, Antonio Scotti, and Adama Didur. Tullio Serafin conducted. Tibbett sang the role of Ford. He was actually the third replacement for the part. As I remember this event, the artist originally scheduled to sing was taken ill. Then Millo Picco was chosen for it. Wilhelm von Wymetal was directing *Falstaff* and, incidentally, he was one of the finest stage directors the Met ever had. Finally one day while rehearsing on the roof stage von Wymetal said he thought Tibbett ought to try his hand at the part. So Tibbett began working at it. Mr. von Wymetal of course knew that Tibbett's voice was excellent, and he had begun to see that this young man had a flair for acting, which was von Wymetal's meat. He loved to work with singers who had a talent for acting. So he spent a great deal of time at rehearsals working with Tibbett.

This began to get on the nerves of Scotti, the Falstaff, so that finally one day while rehearsing he blew his top and said that von Wymetal was spending too much time with this young inexperienced man, and that he, the great Scotti, would not appear with—shall we say it in our language?—such a ham actor. Whereupon Scotti in a rage walked out of the rehearsal.

All this, of course, was so much "Greek" to Tibbett because Scotti, Serafin, and von Wymetal were all talking in Italian and at that time Tibbett couldn't understand a word of it. Adamo Didur was Tibbett's angel and explained

to him what had happened. Of course from that time on relations were a bit strained!

There were meetings in Gatti's office between Gatti, Serafin, Scotti, von Wymetal, and Ziegler and after much discussion it was decided—unanimously—that Tibbett was to do the part. The première finally came and Tibbett sang his aria; the result was unbelievable. The house went into a rage yelling for Tibbett! Tibbett! At first, it seemed, Scotti didn't understand and kept going out for calls until finally someone told him they were calling for Tibbett. He then immediately went to his dressing room. As a young artist, Tibbett was not allowed to go out for a solo curtain call unless so ordered by the management. Gatti was standing on the stage that night, but for some unknown reason said nothing to Tibbett, so he too went off to his dressing room. But the applause kept on, and the yelling for Tibbett, until finally Angelo, the man who dressed the male artists, came running to Tibbett's dressing room and told him that Gatti wanted him on the stage. When Tibbett got there Gatti merely beckoned him to go on out—all this after sixteen minutes of continued applause and yelling. Tibbett finally went out and took one curtain call. A little misunderstanding between a couple of baritones!

At all events this was the beginning for Tibbett. He certainly had a very fine baritone voice, good acting ability, and a most pleasing personality. We all liked Tibbett. His deep voice would boom out, "Hello, Helen," and one could not help but smile and answer cheerily.

Differences of opinion do not happen only between baritones; it may be a baritone versus a soprano. Jeritza, for instance, always liked to pull off "funny stunts," as she called them. Once, in a rehearsal of *Girl of the Golden West*, Tibbett had to pull a ladder down, and the ladder did not come down as gracefully as it should. It hit him on

the nose, which was false, and the nose went out of gear completely. Jeritza, who was waiting for an opportune moment, decided it had come when Tibbett began singing his big aria. She came up to him and gave him a gentle push in the face, which straightened out the damaged nose all right, but almost made him ruin his aria.

Jeritza hated to have anyone smoke while on stage with her. In fact in *Carmen* she used fake cigarettes and never lit them. In one opera, Tibbett had to smoke a cigar while singing with her. She decided to have some fun one evening, snatched the cigar out of his mouth, put it out, and thrust it back between his lips just as he was starting to sing. Lots of fun these artists had while a performance was going on. Usually it was good-natured enough.

Tibbett kept climbing. I shall never forget his Simon Boccanegra in which he seemed to me to reach the top as an opera star. And equally well I loved him when he sang *Don't Fence Me In* over the radio! Tibbett had a great personal following and many admirers and, of course, ranked as one of our most popular Don Juans.

Yes, there were many Don Juans—Richard Crooks, John Brownlee, Charles Kullmann, and tall, dark, and handsome Nicola Moscona. Speaking of Moscona reminds me of an incident which occurred one Saturday afternoon at the Met. The curtain was to rise within a half hour for a performance of *Aida* in which Moscona was scheduled to sing Ramfis. Moscona walked into my office holding a cablegram in his hand which Miss Barry had just sent to his room. He was weeping, for it brought the news that his mother had been killed in Greece. I tried my utmost before curtain time to help him through his terrific shock and grief, but there were only a few minutes left, and the curtain at the Met always went up on time. It did that day, too, and Moscona was right there singing Ramfis. Yes, the audience

knows very little of what may be the personal reasons behind a less than usually fine performance.

I could go on and on about the men of the Met, for never was there a male opera star who did not have a female following, and who did not spend his time dodging some adoring woman! Always surrounded by women, young and old, who wanted autographs at least, it would have been no wonder had our stars had to buy larger head-sizes when they went shopping for their new hats. But on the whole they all took feminine adoration in their stride and were a pretty nice bunch of guys—even the tenors.

CHAPTER 16

SONGBIRDS IN THE SPRING

A SPRING season! Who ever heard of opera in May! Who would want to come to this stuffy old building in warm weather? When do we get a chance to catch our breath? I'm tired out now—and more to come! Who thought up this mad scheme?

This was the rumbling and grumbling going on throughout the building when the employees first heard the rumor of a coming spring season in 1937. When the winter season ended the opera personnel, worn and weary, usually drew a deep breath and relaxed. Ahead was still a pile of unfinished business to be cleared up before the advance work of the new season began. The interval of relaxation and freedom from pressure was always a godsend. And now, said we one and all to each other in the spring of 1936, someone is pulling the chair out from under us. We surmised that the project was just another device to increase receipts and cut down expenses. Finally the matter was decided: there *was* to be a spring season at the Met and it was scheduled for two weeks in May. In spite of our forebodings the innovation turned out to be popular and grew into a four-week run. The management had an air-cooling

system installed—not the comfortable air-conditioning of today—but it was not too effective.

How well I remember the part I played in this first season, a very silent part. Four days before the presentation of *The Bartered Bride*, which was to be sung in English, Mr. Ziegler called for me. I went down to his office and found him bent over a large table in his room, with a huge musical score spread out before him. He did not raise his head or his eyes from the score, which I thought strange at the time. He said, speaking briskly and without a stop:

“Come here, child. I want you to drop everything you are doing. This is the score of *The Bartered Bride* that Madeleine Marshall has just sent down.” Miss Marshall was teacher of diction at the Juilliard School of Music. “She’s written an English translation, and you will notice that she has made three versions—one in red pencil, one in green, and one in blue. I want you to follow this translation, the one in green pencil, and type it out in poetic form, line following line. The libretto printer will stop by and pick up the finished copy at daybreak tomorrow. I’m expecting Miss Marshall to stop in tonight at midnight, to check over what you have done. The printer says he *must* have this in shape very early in the morning if the librettos are to be ready in time for sale before the performance.”

Good Lord, I said to myself, that sounded like the preamble to the Constitution. No wonder my Boss couldn’t look me in the eye! I had never before prepared a libretto for the printer. I had never before put anything into poetic form. A deadline at midnight and it was now nearly four o’clock in the afternoon! I was staggered. My stomach did butterflies and I felt dizzy enough to fall flat upon my face. I tried to look at the score, but all I saw was a maze of red, blue, and green paths, a labyrinth in which I felt I would

surely lose my way—and my mind—before the night was over.

"Wh... wh... why, Mr. Ziegler," I stuttered, "you *can't* mean that you want me to tackle this tonight? I can't make head or tail of it. And what do I know about proper poetic form—oh dear me, I don't think I..."

My dear old Boss, still not looking at me, interrupted and said, determinedly: "Just try it, child. I know you will be able to do it."

I made another feeble attempt. "Why didn't Miss Marshall put her translation into the form she wished? Couldn't she help me with it tonight?"

Mr. Ziegler muttered something about "a sick child," and "impossible now" and said again: "Just try it, child—just try it. Better get going."

Well, I said to myself, you might as well accept the inevitable, Helen. I gathered up the big bundle and staggered with it to my room, thumped it down on a table and dropped into my chair, beset with doubts. I spread the first page of the score in front of me and sat and studied it. I looked closely at Miss Marshall's writing and couldn't read even one whole sentence. I decided to take it word by word. First, I read the original German. Luckily I knew enough of that language to get the general drift. With the meaning in mind I started again to decipher the writing in English. It began to make sense. Miss Marshall must have been under pressure on this job of translation, I decided, for some of her words might well have been written in a sign language. What slow going it was! And *The Bartered Bride* had *three* long acts. In the back of my mind I saw the two hands of the clock pointing straight at midnight—a fatal hour for me and Cinderella. Hurry up, Helen, hurry up. No, I scolded myself, you must not get into a panic. I looked at more of the hieroglyphics—what the hell does

she mean here? Oh dear Miss Marshall, do you know what you are doing to me?

By nine o'clock I had made progress, but I faced the fact—not progress enough. I had a happy thought. Louis Snyder was due to work late that night in the box office. Maybe he was still there. Louis is a smart chap, a good sport, and a kind friend. Maybe he'll help me, I thought, and grabbed the phone and asked Barry to connect me with Louis. What a relief to hear his voice. I poured out my tale of woe and asked for help. "Certainly, Helen, I can come right up," he said. Bless him! "And Louis," I added, feeling very sorry for myself: "I'm awfully hungry—I haven't dared to stop for a bite."

Soon I heard his footsteps coming quickly along the corridor, and what a happy sound that was. In he came with a fat sandwich of ham and cheese and a big container of chocolate malted milk, and nothing ever tasted so good!

"Look here, Louis, you're a Yale graduate while I only graduated from the Fortieth to the Thirty-ninth Street side of the house. Just look at this mess," I grumbled. "See what you can do with it."

About two and a half hours of time remained when together we went at the job with hammer and tongs. We continued with the translation until we had completed it and put it into what we considered a proper poetic form. Then, Louis reading it off, and I typing, we prepared the copy for the printer. Shortly before midnight we reached the last line and the final period. We sank back, exhausted. But, as the climbers reaching the top of Mount Everest might have done, we cried: "Excelsior!"

A vague recollection remains with me that Miss Marshall did thank me, but nothing else was said about this rushed and most difficult task. My Boss just took it in his stride and I evidently was supposed to do the same. Believe it or not,

when *The Bartered Bride* was given as scheduled on May 15, 1936, the brand new librettos went on sale in the lobby right on the button. As a matter of record, it turned out to be the hit of the new spring season. The music is delightful and there was an excellent cast headed by Muriel Dickson, a recruit from the D'Oyly Carte Company.

What a hubbub there was around the Opera House about Muriel Dickson; how charming she was, how delightfully she sang. She would surely be engaged for the regular season, everyone said. She did create a couple of roles at the Met later, including Menotti's *Amelia Goes to the Ball*, his first Met opera. But then she disappeared.

It often happens that way and no one ever seems to know just why. There will be a sudden success, lots of talk and praise, and then as suddenly the star in question fades out of the limelight at the Met. The reason in some cases has been that the singer, after one or two successful roles, increases her demands or makes exorbitant ones. (This wasn't the case with Muriel Dickson.) The management may not feel them justified and refuses. Sometimes the manager of a star will have lucrative outside work lined up for a singer in the concert field, in night clubs or hotels, and the singer will choose to make better money in these fields. Success as a Metropolitan opera singer, even though short-lived, certainly helps a career. One thing I have noticed though; when stars leave the Met for outside work they rarely resume their operatic careers. Another thing comes to mind: the fickle public of more recent years seems to accept with equanimity the departure of a star from the Metropolitan Opera stage. The loss may be regretted but it is soon forgotten in new enthusiasms. "The King—or Queen—Is Dead. Long Live the King!"

Let me get back to the cast of *The Bartered Bride*. Besides the satisfying singing of Muriel Dickson, we had other ex-

cellent artists. Mario Chamlee sang the role of Hans; George Rasely was delightful as Wenzel; and good old Louis D'Angelo, an artist if there ever was one, was so very comical as Kezal. Yes, it was a good show as I well remember, and I have always felt that Louis Snyder and I were a part of it. We often wondered if we had faithfully followed the green line through to its conclusion, or had we strayed a bit on the red or blue paths? Probably no one but Miss Marshall ever knew, and if we did mess up her translation I never heard that she told on us.

A second spring season was given the following year, in 1937, and it brought Mr. Lee Pattison to the Metropolitan as director. Mr. Pattison in turn brought with him Alan Kayes as director of publicity. Mr. Kayes was a young man with plenty of energy and verve and enthusiasm. Mr. Ziegler asked me to assist Mr. Pattison with secretarial duties and I was glad to do so. I found him a most charming man and easy to work for.

Lee Pattison had been for years a concert pianist appearing in the duo-piano team of Guy Maier and Lee Pattison. Just before coming to the Met he had been director of the Music Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) for the government. Mr. Pattison was able to devote his complete attention and efforts to the second spring season and under his excellent direction things moved along swiftly and efficiently.

Dr. Walter Damrosch's opera *The Man Without a Country* was given as one of the season's attractions. It was at a rehearsal for this opera that I first heard Helen Traubel sing. I knew at once that here was an outstanding voice, and I ran to get Louis Snyder to come hear her. We were in accord again, both feeling that Traubel was surely a coming big star. I told Mr. Ziegler the next day how we felt, how

wonderful we thought Traubel's voice was. At that time he was not particularly enthusiastic. "Yes, it's a good voice," he answered me with hesitation, "but one of the conductors says she has no top."

I looked at Mr. Ziegler in amazement, and wanted to say: "For heaven's sake, don't *you* know it's a grand voice, and certainly it has a top!" But of course a good secretary doesn't argue with her boss. It made me furious to think that one slight remark of this kind, made casually by a conductor, could influence a clever person like my Boss, and could delay a fine career like Traubel's. Louis and I were not surprised, therefore, when Traubel was not engaged for the regular season.

Recalling the rehearsals of *The Man Without a Country*, I remember one day when Dr. Damrosch was conducting the rehearsal. Suddenly he stopped the orchestra and called to the stage manager: "Please, please, we must have quiet! Those men backstage must stop that noise. I can't hear the music with that noise going on. Now please stop it instantly." (Incidentally, this was not the way in which the majority of conductors would have called for quiet. Dr. Damrosch was a fine gentleman and his language was mild compared with that of the others.) There was an interval of quiet while the stage manager went back to warn the stagehands. Just as he returned another great bang filled the stage with noise, and Dr. Damrosch's face was a study. The stage manager came forward and waited a moment for the noise to die down, then, grinning, he called: "Sorry, Maestro, can't do a thing about it. There's a terrific thunder storm going on outside." Dr. Damrosch and the orchestra men laughed heartily and Dr. Damrosch agreed he would have to submit to this act of God.

In October, 1939, Helen Traubel gave a Town Hall concert and the press the next morning was excellent, the critics

all mentioning her big lovely voice. I was delighted and felt it was a vindication of my opinion. After reading all the reviews I went down to Mr. Ziegler's office to see what he had to say now. He and Luigi Villa were bent over the newspapers and reading aloud excerpts from the criticisms to each other. "What do you think, Mr. Ziegler?" I asked, with a Cheshire cat grin on my face. "You know," he said to Luigi and me, "I think we have got to take this woman." *Got* to take! I was so mad, and so glad at the same time, that I had to make an excuse to rush away and blow off steam to Louis Snyder. After the Town Hall concert Helen Traubel sang with the Philharmonic and received rave notices. Then the musical crowd began to ask: "Why isn't Traubel at the Met?"

The management engaged Helen Traubel, under a small contract as it was called, to appear as Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* in a December, 1939, performance. Traubel was doing her first rehearsal with the orchestra on the roof stage and Mr. Ziegler went up to hear her. He came down later and said to me: "Go up to the roof stage and listen to that magnificent voice." I was delighted to hear him say that, and glad to rush upstairs, make myself inconspicuous, and let Wagner's wonderful music and Traubel's great voice carry me off to Valhalla.

The night of Traubel's debut as Sieglinde I came back from dinner and, about to cross the stage to my office, saw Traubel with Leopold Sachse, the stage director, who had just finished showing her some last-minute stage business. Helen Traubel is a large woman, as probably everyone knows now since her appearances on television. She is also a friendly and genuinely nice person, with a booming hearty laugh. She admits herself that she likes to eat and enjoys snacks at odd moments. The good solid frame she has de-

veloped seems only to have enhanced the quality and vitality of her big voice.

That night—her first performance in a regular season—Traubel looked so composed, so unflurried, so placid, that I marveled at her lack of debut nerves, which I had seen so many times expressed in so many different ways. But Traubel had none of them; she appeared totally unconcerned about the coming ordeal of a big Met debut in a top role, which was to take place in just a couple of hours. My mind could not help but flip back to Rosa Ponselle, who might have continued to be one of our greatest singing stars could she have conquered stagefright.

I walked across the stage toward Miss Traubel to wish her everything good, and she came toward me with hand outstretched in her friendly way. I said my warm good wishes, whereupon she said suddenly, "I'm going to kiss you for good luck," and she did. It must have acted as a charm for she certainly went on to tremendous success at the Met. Traubel sang the great Wagnerian roles—all the Brünnhilde's and the demanding and splendid role of Isolde—with the consistent acclaim of both the press and the crowded houses she drew.

Nothing succeeds like success. As a Metropolitan Opera star Traubel was acclaimed all over the country. She was wanted everywhere, for symphonic and concert dates and became one of the top singers of America.

Luck, fate, chance, fortune—name it yourself—played a strange game at this time with the three big stars of the Met: the Norwegian Flagstad, with her assured position as the greatest Wagnerian soprano of her era; the Australian Marjorie Lawrence, with youth and everything else in hand to achieve a fine reputation as a Wagnerian star; and Helen Traubel, the rising American star, singing her first Sieglinde. Suddenly came Flagstad's decision to return to Europe and

her unhappy departure from the Met. While appearing in opera in Mexico Marjorie Lawrence was suddenly crippled—a terrible tragedy—and her contract necessarily canceled. Fate tossed the torch into Traubel's hands and she was ready to be the new and undisputed queen of the Opera House.

What luck it was for the Met to have another magnificent voice all ready to fill the bill. It was not due to any forethought or special planning on the part of the management—it was just pure luck. The staff often discussed these strange events over luncheon and dinner tables. It was a favorite topic of conversation. How would the management have handled the situation had all three stars remained under contract at one time, three stars of the magnitude of Flagstad, Lawrence, and Traubel, all singing the same roles? Would their rivalry have been too great, produced too many difficult situations? Who would have retired first, who would have survived? Fate intervened and no answers were ever necessary. Today even Jimmy Durante knows that Helen Traubel has a top!

There I go reminiscing again about the Met's top stars, and in the last chapter I will write about the glamour gals and the Don Juans of the Opera House. Yet I have not mentioned some of the greatest performers at the Met: the artists who sing roles not specifically known as star roles, singers who are as important to opera as the stars themselves. I mean artists like Louis D'Angelo, George Cehanovsky, Thelma Votipka, Lucielle Browning, Irra Petina, Doris Doe, Norman Cordon, Maxine Stellman, and many others. George Cehanovsky and Thelma Votipka have outlasted many a top star, have given consistently fine performances, and have rated many a laudatory line from the critics.

Thelma Votipka was, and continues to be, one of the most valued artists at the Opera House. She has sung what

we call secondary roles (often misnamed, as such, I think) in a star manner and with a magnificent voice, and many times I have been told by a rabid opera fan that they thought Votipka's voice one of the very best.

One day I heard a dramatic soprano rehearsing Brangäne's music from *Tristan und Isolde* in a voice so beautiful and resonant and full that I was compelled to listen. I knew that very few of the artists were in the house just then and I couldn't seem to place the voice. I hated to be stumped like that when I knew practically every voice in the company, so I deliberately watched to see who might be coming out of that rehearsal room after singing so splendidly. When Votipka finally emerged, I was amazed and asked: "Was that you singing? Why in heaven's name don't you try for bigger roles when you can sing like that?"

Votipka's reply was: "I would have to spend an enormous amount of money on special coaching and I'd never get much chance anyway." I understood what she meant and knew she was right. Once set in a pattern at the Met, particularly in those days, and only a miracle could free you. A singer of second roles usually stays a singer of second roles. Many artists accept a secondary role at first just to get into the Met, hoping to reach the top, but rarely does this happen. Many soon get discouraged and leave, going into concert work, making hotel appearances, or singing in Broadway operettas.

The repertoire which Votipka has piled up over the years is enormous. She has probably sung more roles than any other artist. So dependable, so accomplished, so fine a singer as Thelma Votipka would be a pillar of strength in any opera house around the world. She was born in Cleveland and made her debut at the Met as Flora in *La Traviata* on December 16, 1935, during Edward Johnson's regime. In the 1939-40 season Votipka established a record, with forty-

nine performances in twelve operas, and her record has gone on and on for years.

Tosca was one of Grace Moore's successful roles. In the beginning of the second act Tosca sings offstage—very high and difficult music. Votipka often sang those gorgeous high notes for La Moore. This was no secret naturally to any of the Met family or to some of the critics. One of the critics thought Votipka ought to have some credit, and he once mentioned this substitution in his column the morning following a Tosca performance. Grace Moore was furious—really furious—and we had quite a scene in Mr. Ziegler's office. She even accused Votipka of having given it away, which she hadn't done, of course.

La Moore had a bit of a temper, but we all liked her. She was so gay, so sparkling, with a devilish twinkle in her eye, and personality plus. As Mr. Rudolf Bing, the new general manager of the Met has been heard to say, there is no substitute for personality. Grace Moore wrote her own story of her climb to success. It showed an astonishing example of the determination and unswerving resolution of a petite and pretty little southern girl from Tennessee to become a great singer. She achieved her heart's desire and made a fine career for herself at the Metropolitan Opera.

The Met baritone, George Cehanovsky, was born in St. Petersburg when that Russian city was still gay and free. Like Votipka, he is one of the really fine and reliable artists who are the backbone and standby of the Opera House.

Louis D'Angelo was another baritone with a beautiful voice and one of the finest artists the Met ever had under contract. He was with the company for many seasons. We all admired him greatly and he was one of my favorite artists.

Another favorite of mine was Norman Cordon, the bass baritone. I always thought that if Cordon's voice, by the

grace of God, could only have been a bit larger, he would have gone a long way as an outstanding operatic artist.

Thinking of Cordon reminds me of a story which my Boss once related to me with great relish. The Metropolitan was on tour and Cleveland was one of the stops. It often happened that while on tour the management and artists would be lavishly entertained by prominent opera patrons and important people of the city where performances were being given. Cleveland dined them well. After the banquet the artists were called upon to make a little speech or to say as few words as they wished. Among them this night was Jan Kiepura, the tenor. He arose and with appropriate gestures made the following little speech:

"When I get off boat and see New York for first time, I am overcome. I thenk of the beeg, beeg, beeg buildings and I look up, and then I look down at Kiepura, and I thenk: Leetle Kiepura, he vay down here under these beeg buildings. Kiepura, he is frightened. Oh, the beeg buildings they frighten Kiepura. But then, Kiepura he thenk: Aha! the beeg buildings they cannot seeng, but Kiepura, *he* can seeng! Oh, I *loff* America, I *loff* America!" Then he slapped himself on the chest and sat down. Mr. Ziegler said that everyone roared with laughter and loved it.

After Cleveland the company went to Rochester, New York. As the train pulled into the Rochester station, Cordon hopped off first. While the rest disembarked, there was Cordon striding up and down, looking up at the buildings and then down at himself, slapping himself vigorously on the chest, and shouting: "I *loff* Rochester! I *loff* Rochester!" Norman Cordon was always quite a cut-up and kept the company laughing.

Then there was Lucielle Browning, who always did a splendid job in secondary roles, and Irra Petina who sang Carmen and Mignon at the Met. Eventually Petina left and

made quite a success in the leading part in a Broadway operetta, *Song of Norway*, which portrayed the life of Grieg.

Maxine Stellman did some beautiful singing. I remember one day Mr. Ziegler talked about her and said to me: "Hasn't Stellman a truly beautiful voice?" I felt that she was attracting attention and that she might make progress, but little happened. One night in Boston she stepped in and saved the day when the star scheduled to sing Elsa in *Lohengrin* suddenly developed the bugaboo of all singers—laryngitis. Fortunately Stellman was in Boston and available and, most important of course, knew the part of Elsa. I heard from many who were present that night that Stellman did a magnificent job in the emergency. Here at last is where Stellman gets her chance, we all said. But again nothing more happened, and she continued in second roles.

Secondary singers can approach star standing, as Votipka and others have done, but always there is the well-publicized star to draw the audience's attention and interest, and to wear the most handsome costumes. Then, too, the composers give the leading singers the brilliant and showy arias. The secondary artist rarely gets the spotlight for long. These artists, however, can and do achieve certain effects that bring them attention and applause. Personality and characterization of a part can increase the stature of a role, as can acting ability and makeup. And, of course, an excellent voice always helps! Louis D'Angelo did not depend upon his fine voice alone. He spent a lot of time on his makeup, never overdoing it, working hard to get the right effect in both looks and acting, and in consequence he was one of our finest artists.

Is success in opera a matter of chance? Of luck? Of favoritism? Of being under your natal star at the right moment? Who can say? So many many factors enter into a

singer's progress and possible rise to stardom at the Met. All the artists at the Opera House have unusually fine voices; but some like Tibbett arrive at the top in a meteor-like way, while others like Votipka distinguish themselves in secondary roles. Flagstad sang abroad for two decades before the Met gave her a contract. Traubel won her way into the Opera House in spite of the management. Some favored singers are a flash-in-the-pan: great applause—and then suddenly they are gone. Others last a dozen years and then are out. It is a strange business, with great successes, great disappointments, many hopes and ambitions never fully realized.

But to the fine artists who are the singing backbone of the Opera House, who go on year after year giving splendid performances in secondary roles, taking good care of their voices, increasing their repertoire, always dependable and sure, a loud hurrah and a long life!

CHAPTER 17

THE WHIRLPOOL

FROM husbands and wives of singers, Good Lord deliver us!" A little prayer which Mr. Ziegler often muttered under his breath at the Opera House, and which others most fervently echoed. How many times we were annoyed and embarrassed by the over-anxiety of relatives of stars, who hovered around like mothers of Hollywood child-starlets. They seemed always to create an atmosphere of sharp-eyed watchfulness, as if their darlings were at the mercy of a horde of unscrupulous people, and must be protected each step of the way. Husbands and wives of singers came to rehearsals and stood around asking questions (I used to duck any I saw in the distance), gossiping with each other, trying to find out if one singer had been given an advantage over another. If they thought so there was hell to pay. The wives were more numerous, but really no more provoking than the husbands. We often asked one another why they never seemed to have anything better to do at home or abroad. Some of them never missed a single rehearsal. Did the singers really want their wives or husbands there or did they have to accept them, willy nilly, as we did? Sometimes a rehearsal must have been quite embarrassing for them.

In the heat of rehearsal, when the conductor is working

madly to bring the performance to perfection, he will let loose with curses and abusive speech that would shock the general public. I once heard one of the biggest stars at the Met screamed at: "Pig! You big pig, you! God damn it, you missed a beat!" Most singers take this kind of vituperation with wonderful aplomb, even though they may want to lean over and slap the conductor's face. At rehearsals, however, the conductor is in absolute charge musically. Tempo and interpretation are his forte, and the biggest star in the company must accept his verdict. Though they may hate each other violently during rehearsals, the singers and the conductors are usually the best of friends when work is finished. I have known cases where relations between a soprano and a conductor were, to put it mildly, most intimate indeed, and yet once she was on the stage in rehearsal he would revile her, yelling out nasty names, and scalding epithets. He wanted his pet to be note-perfect and a success. Perhaps he had to pay for it afterwards—I do not know.

When a role in a new production is assigned to a singer, she first works on it with her personal coach. Then a certain number of rehearsals are assigned to her in a small room at the Met, with an assistant conductor at the piano. Never underrate the value of assistant conductors at the Opera House, nor the quality of their work. Each is assigned a certain number of operas to coach at the start of a season; some coach only German opera, others French or Italian, as their forte may be.

The next step may be a rehearsal called on the roof stage, with the conductor, the assistant conductor who has been working with the singer, and a stage director. The piano is again the only instrument used. The floor on the roof stage is marked to show the area to be covered on the big stage, with chalk marks indicating entrances and exits. By this time the role has been learned and the star knows the speci-

fied stage business. Letter-perfect in words, music, and stage direction, the singer then is ready for the full rehearsal on the real Metropolitan stage, with complete cast present, including chorus and ballet. Everyone necessary to the performance attends, including the full orchestra. Several rehearsals of this kind may take place, and then, finally, all is ready for the dress rehearsal, which is a finished product. To this rehearsal singers often invite their friends, and you may be sure that relatives are present. Sometimes the management will invite the critics to a dress rehearsal, feeling that it may be of help to them to have a prehearing of the actual performance before rendering judgment upon it.

The whole building is in a hubbub and becomes something of a madhouse while these rehearsals are going on, which means it is in that state practically all winter as rehearsals occur daily until the season is over. In all the smaller rooms individual artists are practicing; the Fortieth Street roof stage is in use; the chorus is in rehearsal; the orchestra is playing through a score on the second roof stage, the one on the Thirty-ninth Street side of the building; and the ballet is on its toes doing its exercises and pirouettes. On the big stage the crew is hammering and shoving scenery around, and even the radiators and steam pipes add to the noise with their click-clack, click-clack, as the engineer and his crew way downstairs begin to push up steam to warm the drafty old place a bit. No wonder we often felt as though we were spinning round and round in a mad whirlpool at this three-ring Opera House. Yet, out of all this confusion comes an opera performance for thousands to enjoy and applaud.

The building is strangely lacking in space. As I have said, the architect concentrated heavily on the auditorium, as the rest of the house is made up of odd rooms here and there, where space permits, with a sad dearth of practice- and

dressing-rooms for the singers. Thus it is necessary to have a very tight schedule for rehearsals, so that there will be no overlapping or confusion as to time and place. After the management has decided on the repertoire, the musical secretary—first he was Giuseppe Sturani and in later years Frank St. Leger—makes up the rehearsal book. This is then handed to Frank Paola who has had many a headache over it in his time. Under the supervision of the musical secretary, Frank notifies the artists, orchestra, chorus, in fact everyone concerned, of the scheduled rehearsal and he must be sure that these notices go out in good time, so that there cannot be any excuses about receiving word too late. Frank's job is really terrific.

These rehearsal notices are mailed in blue envelopes, and sometimes can have an electrifying effect upon the artist. Occasionally, a top star, who has sung a certain role many times and is therefore quite at home in it, does not care to give time to another rehearsal and chooses to pass it up. (This is not true of dress rehearsals, which are obligatory.) Or it may be that the management decides to give another singer a chance to sing the role at rehearsals, so that if a last-minute substitution is ever necessary, he or she, as the case may be, will have had the experience. The artist who receives the blue envelope, with its unexpected call to rehearsal, may think excitedly: "Here, at last, is my chance to sing Aïda!" or "Here at last is my chance to do Lohengrin!" After the rehearsal there is impatient waiting and watching the mails for the call to dress rehearsal. When that does not come along in due time, then the artist knows that he, or she, has been merely a rehearsal replacement. However, the opportunity to sing a role in this way should never be underestimated—who knows what might happen one day or when the chance might come? The management sometimes uses this method to "break in" a new singer. I know

that in the past Mr. Gatti and Mr. Ziegler often were pressed to give a singer under contract a chance to do a big role at a rehearsal—for experience and for any future contingency, and also to show the management what the singer could do.

The office of the musical secretary also handles the *Cast Book*, a large bound volume something like a diary. In it, in ink, is written the cast of the day's opera. It is passed around and signed by a dozen or more people in the house. In my time it went to the general manager, to Mr. Ziegler, Mr. Lewis, Mr. Garlichs in the treasurer's office, to the conductor of the performance, the assistant conductor, the stage director, the stage manager, and to all heads of stage and wardrobe departments, and finally to Flossie Morton in the Thirty-ninth Street office, who gave out such information to those who telephoned. With everybody along the line noting the singers scheduled for the day's opera, and attesting with their signatures, there was little chance of a mix-up in cast or of incorrect information going out.

I almost forgot one important person who has to see the *Cast Book* each day, the man who puts up the billboards outside the Opera House. He is one of the first to be notified of any change in cast through illness or other emergency, since he must immediately paste the name of the replacement artist over that of the indisposed artist. Sometimes the emergency happens too late to make a change in the printed program. If there is still time a small notice is printed and slipped into the program for the evening. Sometimes, of course, it is too late to do even this, but the "regulars" attending the opera know who is singing the role as soon as the replacement artist steps on stage, and his or her name goes buzzing softly through the big house.

Going back to rehearsals reminds me of a couple of funny episodes. I remember when *Lakmé* was to be given with

adorable Lily Pons in the title role. We felt as if burlesque was invading the Metropolitan Opera. Rosina Galli's ballet girls were never permitted to appear at any time without being fully covered. By that I mean they always wore long tights. There were no bare legs showing, no midriffs exposed; every muscle was held firmly in place with no wabbling tissues to show. But now—think of it—the *Lakmé* ballet was going to expose navels, even down to the scars left by appendectomies. Yes, Lily Pons started it all. And the ballet girls needed coat-hanger hips to hold up their skirts while they danced.

This exposure of the umbilicus, as Mr. Ziegler called it in his joking way, was certainly an innovation and it was no surprise to find everyone on hand to watch the *Lakmé* ballet rehearsing. One day, at the conclusion of the rehearsal, Lily Pons was going to her dressing room, followed by a string of ballet girls all walking along in duck fashion, each of them, including Lily Pons, showing a wide expanse of bare midriff. Mr. Ziegler was trailing along at the end of the line. Kathleen Harding, our ballet secretary, was coming in the opposite direction. As he passed her, scarcely glancing her way, Mr. Ziegler said: "How do you do, Miss Harding? I'm just following the navel parade." This past winter I went to a performance of *Samson et Dalila* and as I watched the ballet I thought back to this first innovation of the "navel parade," now a regular thing at the Met. Of course, I had to keep reminding myself, this is *art*.

The other funny episode happened one morning when Phil Crispino, the property master, came hurriedly into Mr. Ziegler's office. "Say, Boss, can you come up to the roof stage a minute? I don't know what will happen to the two of them up there; they're going nuts."

"What is the trouble?" said Mr. Ziegler calmly.

"Grace Moore and Jan Kiepura. They're practicing the

first act of *La Bohème*, and Kiepura places the chair for Moore to sit down—way back stage. Moore gets ahold of it and moves it up front but before she can sit down Kiepura grabs it and shoves it back. That's been going on for half an hour so I came down for you. Moore just turned on him and said: 'Listen, Jan, you cut this out! Don't think you are going to put me in the background. I'll have you understand that I have been in the movies too; I'm just as important as you are! You listen to me: you put this chair where you know darn well it should be, and *you leave it there!*' I don't know what will happen next; you'd better come up."

Mr. Ziegler just shrugged his shoulders and said: "Oh, let them fight it out, and may the best man win."

The story went the rounds of the Opera House, of course. *La Bohème* was to be sung the following Saturday afternoon and we all made it our business to go out front to see what would happen. There they were, Grace Moore and Kiepura, singing their heads off, each trying to outdo the other. Kiepura placed the chair toward the rear, Moore picked it up and brought it up stage, but before she could sit down he would again shove it back. La Moore had her dander up—she grabbed the chair, pushed it forward and sat down on it almost in one motion. She had won! The audience seemed to have no idea of what was going on; they probably thought it part of the act. The applause was terrific for both of the artists at the end of the act, and I really think this rivalry made them sing better than usual.

I always got a great kick of Kiepura. His valet was forever chasing around after him, with an atomizer in his hand. Kiepura would stop suddenly, open his mouth; the valet pressed the bulb of the atomizer and a spray shot into the tenor's throat. The valet would then step back and follow Kiepura until the performance had to be repeated. It was

like a scene from a musical comedy. One day I couldn't resist stopping Kieपुरa and questioning him. I had seen other stars use throat aids of course, but never with such frequency and seriousness as Kieपुरa. "Mr. Kieपुरa," I said, "do tell me what is in your spray. You seem to find it so invaluable."

"Ah, dear Mees Klaffky, that ees Kieपुरa's seecret. That ees what makes the grrreat voice. It ees *my* seecret!"

I've often wondered why he doesn't put the magic elixir on the market; it would surely make a fortune for him if it could reproduce the grrreat voice of Kieपुरa!

Curt Taucher was another well-known tenor in those days. He sang the title role of *Siegfried* one afternoon and established what I feel continues to be the greatest demonstration of "the show must go on" in the history of the Met. In preparation for a smokescreen about to be used, the crew had opened a trapdoor on the stage. Taucher, singing away with his whole heart, finished his aria in triumph, moved forward a bit too far and went down into the open hole. He was all dolled up and handsome in the traditional abbreviated shaggy costume which Siegfried always wears. The famous sword Nothung, which he had been brandishing, slipped out of his hand and was lost temporarily. Down the chute, way down to the subbasement, about thirty feet below, went the unhappy tenor, collecting along the way all the dirt and dust and grime of years which was adhering to the sides of the trap. It was a miracle the artist was not killed or seriously injured.

In less time than it has taken to tell about it Taucher hit the basement floor, to the astonishment of the men down there. They ran to help and picked up something that looked less than human, a big, dirty dust mop with two legs. The telephone in the basement was ringing madly as the crew upstairs tried to get the men downstairs to break Taucher's

fall. But Taucher had reached there first and had saved himself. He vigorously pushed away the men trying to help him, ran for the elevator to get upstairs to the stage again, all the time crying, "*Mein Schwert! Wo ist mein Schwert?*" (My sword! Where is my sword!) He had to have it for use on stage. (The sword is supposed to have magic powers for Siegfried; perhaps it did protect him that night!)

In the meantime everybody had telephoned everybody else. There was a call for first aid, for a doctor, for Mr. Gatti, for Mr. Ziegler, for any kind of help that anyone thought of. Walter Jagemann came running down from the Technical Department with a first-aid kit and a whole glassful of aromatic spirits of ammonia, and to his intense astonishment ran into Taucher just emerging from the elevator, still a sight to behold. Taucher grabbed the glass—probably thought it was water—and gulped it down without a quiver. Walter was in a panic then, not knowing what a whole glassful of the stuff would do to the man. Maybe he'd drop dead now! But Taucher started running again for the wings, with Walter running alongside, beating the dust out of his bearskin. Someone had sent a stagehand for another sword, and just as Taucher reached the wings Phil Crispano handed it to him. "*Mein Schwert!*" Taucher cried happily, as though everything was now all right.

Right on cue, as though nothing had happened, as though he had not just escaped death, Taucher went back on stage and sang the remainder of the performance in fine voice. The steam curtain which the stage crew sent up had covered Taucher's fall. We doubted if the audience knew then what had happened.

As the curtain came down after the performance, Mr. Gatti and Mr. Ziegler rushed to Taucher to shake his hand and tell him how splendid he had been. It was not until Mr. Gatti clasped Taucher's hand that the tenor realized he had

broken his little finger. How he ever escaped a broken neck we could never figure out. In any case he gave a remarkable example of fortitude and courage.

I remember seeing another accident, but picayune in comparison to Taucher's. During a performance of *Carmen*, Martinelli as Don José was trying to make love to a scornful Carmen, sung by Bruna Castagna. Castagna, incidentally, was one of the finest Carmens the Met ever had. The braid on Don José's coat caught in Carmen's black wig, and off it came as Martinelli took his arm away. Martinelli nonchalantly caught the wig and put it back on Castagna's head. She as unconcernedly raised her arms gracefully and adjusted it. All the time the two of them sang on in full voice and lustily, never missing a beat. The audience tittered but loved the ease with which the artists met the awkward situation, and gave them a vigorous hand at the end of the scene.

One of the most important people in the production of opera is the chorus master, and in my time Giulio Setti was one of the best. He had very definite ideas about the makeup of the chorus and to me they were both logical and right. Operagoers sometimes commented upon the strange looking men and women in the chorus and asked why the chorus could not be more streamlined. "How ridiculous," Mr. Setti would snap back. "I will never provide a Broadway musical comedy chorus line!" He would explain that the chorus in an opera usually represents a cross-section of a village or community or city, or whatever the scene calls for. He wanted *people*—thin and fat, long and short, old and middle-aged, some young and some children. The kind of people you might pass on the street, or meet at the village postoffice, or see in church. He wanted the chorus to look like ordinary villagers and peasants, soldiers or students, pilgrims, or citizens of Paris; like nobles and ladies and gentle-

men of the court, or factory girls and workers—all the wide range of characters listed in the librettos. In short, he wanted a representative group of people.

The first requirement for members of the chorus must be a good voice. Then they must be intelligent, be able to speak several languages, and must have a good working knowledge of opera. If they have these qualifications they can look any way the Lord has made them, and they need not try to glamorize themselves.

Operagoers rarely realize that a member of the chorus must have a repertoire of from thirty to forty operas, though a solo singer may specialize in but four or five roles, and may sometimes sing in only one language. A chorus member, however, must be able to sing in the language of any opera. Most of the Met's chorus in my time were foreign born and were all good linguists. Time and money had been invested in learning their parts and they all worked hard at keeping their voices in good shape. A chorus master has little time for individual instruction; he needs well-trained singers ready to respond to his baton.

During Mr. Setti's regime at the Met, Fausto Cleva was one of his assistants. Mr. Cleva is now one of the outstanding Italian conductors at the Opera House. The Maestro conducted on the opening night of the season 1952-53, which is always an honor for the conductor, as well as for the singers who are especially chosen each year for this gala occasion.

The chorus at the Met is unionized; each member has to belong to the Grand Opera Choral Alliance. Many of the chorus have been members for years and years, and stay on as long as their voices hold out. I am sure the opera audience comes to recognize their faces and figures over the years—especially the figures. Maria Savage was probably the best known of any of the chorus, and got to be quite an in-

stitution around the Opera House. She was always called Madame Savage, the name being pronounced in the French manner, So-vaje. Her tall stately figure could be picked out in the chorus and she wore her costumes well. If an opera called for any special little stage business by a chorister, Madame Savage played the part. She was a member of the Met chorus for nearly thirty-five years and retired just a few years ago.

Everybody who goes to the opera regularly knows where the prompter's box is, and that all through the performance he is beating time and giving cues. He is on stage all through the opera, yet is never seen, and never gets a bit of the applause due him. The small coop where he sits is at the center front edge of the stage, and the part seen from the auditorium looks like a small wooden awning resting on the floor, with its back to the audience. A newcomer to opera might not notice it at all at first.

The prompter is a very important person during performances. He speaks the first word of every line of the score, and he beats time in exact unison with the conductor. Since he sits with his back to the conductor's podium he relies on a little mirror adjusted to reflect clearly the conductor and his baton. I've noticed singers who looked at the prompter much more often than at the conductor. He can be invaluable to a singer who has a moment's lapse, or to a new singer.

We had one old prompter at the Met, there for years and years, who spoke the cue words so loudly that we had letters of complaint from subscribers in the front rows. Mr. Ziegler had to ask him to pipe down. He knew every opera backwards. He really did not need a score in front of him to follow. He figured out his income tax and his profits or losses from the day's stock market reports while prompting

a performance. He covered the margins of his score sheets with figures. This sounds fantastic but it is quite true. I would watch him prompting, speaking the cue words, giving the conductor's beat, and then suddenly, with the other hand, he would scribble a column of figures down the margin of the score in front of him, never missing a beat. He was a great old character, simply soaked in opera.

The prompter at the Met must naturally be an excellent musician and must have a vast knowledge of operatic works. He must be completely at ease in his job and one beat ahead of the singer, so to speak. It would be wise, too, for him to be fairly slim, for he must work in a snug little coop!

I sat in the prompter's box a couple of times, but not to prompt. That's one job I've never been asked to do, and couldn't do. But we were having one of the Save-the-Met campaigns and Fiorello La Guardia, our Little Flower, then Mayor of New York, and a great lover of music, was to make a speech for us. The Mayor's speeches were often *ad lib* and the management wanted to be sure that we had on file every word he said. So Helen was delegated to take it down, word for word, and the prompter's box seemed the best place for me to sit. I had lots of fun crowding in with the prompter and watching a scene from there, an entirely new angle for me. The scene ended an act and during the intermission the Mayor spoke. I worked fast to get down all he said, for with a subject so dear to his heart as music, the Mayor gave a warm and colorful and at times a fiery appeal to save the Met. Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt also made an appeal for us at another time and I sat in the prompter's box again to take it down.

This reminds me of some more note-taking I did in the auditorium. Maestro Bodanzky was rehearsing *Salome*, and he asked me to sit in the front row and take down whatever instructions he shouted at the orchestra. He was not well

then, and beginning to fail in health, and he found it difficult to remember just what changes and criticisms he made at rehearsals of *Salome*, one of our occasional operas. I took down, and then typed for him, more pages of funny notations. (I left out the swearing, naturally!) They went something like this: *First violins—pg. 10—slow down. Stransky, you're a quarter beat off. Pg. 19—french horn off key. Minelli, I want to see you later. Pg. 40—flutes.* And on and on. The Maestro thanked me kindly and said the notes were very helpful in refreshing his memory.

CHAPTER 18

SILENT PARTNERS

TO be a receptionist or a telephone operator at the Met—that would be my choice! If ever I come back to this life again I put in a bid right now for one of these jobs. Undoubtedly they are the most enjoyable and interesting ones at our Opera House. For many reasons the receptionist and the telephone operator are, of all the staff, in the best observation posts.

Anyone who has ever entered the Thirty-ninth Street office door in past years cannot help but remember Flossie and Barry, Florence Morton and Irene Barry. Barry is still holding the fort, but dear old Flossie went to heaven a few years ago, and I am certain she now is welcoming friends at the Golden Gate.

Flossie sat at a small desk inside the door and greeted everyone graciously and with a warm smile. She was a character. Short and fat and pleasing, she looked very much like Madame Schumann-Heink, and many people told her that. She wore her hair drawn up and had a bun on the top of her head, just the way Schumann-Heink always wore her hair. Caruso nicknamed her Peaches, because she had plump and rosy cheeks. (That was before my time, but the name stuck.) Flossie had a loud hearty laugh, laughing with you

but never at you. She was not a gossip but she did love a good funny story, sometimes a bit on the bawdy side. If she did pass along a story or rumor going the rounds of the House, it would have its funny side, and never be a malicious piece of gossip.

Everyone used to kid Flossie about her enormous appetite. She could eat at any time of the day or evening, and it usually added up to about six meals a day. She hardly ever went outdoors for a meal. Once she arrived at the Opera House she stayed there until her day was finished, which, during the opera season, meant until after the end of the evening performance. Flossie actually lived most of her life in her little cubicle, and had her frequent meals and snacks brought in to her.

For some reason or other Flossie had no use for banks. She carried large sums of money on her person, which made her friends nervous for her safety, as she usually went home so late at night. But no one ever robbed or injured Flossie—the Good Lord must have kept watch over her.

Irene Barry, still the indispensable Barry of the Met, was left a widow at an early age, with four small daughters to rear, four of the most beautiful little Irish lassies you ever saw. Barry devoted herself to their care and education and has done as fine a job with her children as she has done for the Met.

An excellent operator, Barry keeps her fingers on the pulse of the Opera House, always knows who is in and who has left and what's happening. She meets all emergencies in a quick and competent fashion. Often she has a call for help on its way before the rest of us recover our wits. Two deaths happened at the Met while I was secretary to Mr. Ziegler, many sudden illnesses, and of course there were many more or less serious emergencies during performances. In all these

cases Barry's sure hand plugged the right connection and her quick wits called at once for the proper assistance.

Barry was the heroine the Saturday afternoon that Martinelli sang his big tenor aria, "*Celeste Aida*," in a performance of *Aida*, and then collapsed on the stage. The curtain was hastily rung down. There was tremendous excitement in the audience, especially among the Italians, who were crying and wringing their hands, sure that their idol must be dying. As in all such emergencies too many people were running about, trying to be of help, but only getting in the way. There was a doctor in the house, yes, but no other operatic tenor!

News always flashes quickly around the Met—you might think we all had a walkie-talkie system. Barry, at her switchboard, knew what had happened almost before the curtain touched the floor. Without waiting to be told she telephoned Frederick Jagel at his apartment and said, "Come quickly, Martinelli has collapsed!"

Jagel had been listening over the radio and had heard the announcement that had been made, so he was not too surprised at the summons. The difficulty was that he was minding his two small sons for the afternoon. He had to bundle them up, get them into a taxi, and make a dash for the Thirty-ninth Street office. Helpful hands relieved him of the children and helped him into a costume. Thanks to Barry's quick thinking the curtain went up again only thirty minutes after it had hurriedly descended. Of course, the task of getting a replacement is in the hands of the management, but on this occasion Barry's assumption that Jagel would be called was quite right and everything worked out splendidly. Frederick Jagel was a fine tenor who sang many roles, a most dependable artist, and Barry happened to know that he was to be at home that afternoon.

When all the excitement was over and *Aida* in full swing

again, I finally caught up with my Boss in his office. He was chuckling and laughing. I asked him what had actually happened to Martinelli, and was it serious? He replied, "Well, this is the first time in my long career that I ever heard of a case of indigestion stopping a Metropolitan opera performance."

The first time that death came into the building at the Met was to take Beniamino Gigli's chauffeur, who was waiting until the singer had finished a rehearsal. Standing just inside the Thirty-ninth Street door, he suddenly dropped dead, without a forewarning or a sound. The longest time elapsed before the coroner came and the body could be removed. It was a disturbing and sad event.

The second death was a tragic and momentous occasion, and we were all intimately concerned and emotionally shaken. It remains a vivid memory. The victim was Herbert Witherspoon, who had just been made the new general manager, following the resignation of Gatti-Casazza.

The new director was quite different in temperament from the Latin Gatti and when he came in we could not help but wonder what changes would be made throughout the house. Mr. Witherspoon was bubbling over with enthusiasm for his new appointment and opportunities. He wanted to do so much, had so many wonderful plans in mind. He would burst into Mr. Ziegler's office with a new idea to talk over, so keyed up that he never walked, but literally ran, from one point to another. One day my Boss said to me: "I wish Mr. W. would take it easier, he'll last longer." Prophetic words.

It was on the morning of May 10, 1935 that I entered Mr. Ziegler's office door and at the same time Mr. Witherspoon entered by the connecting door that led from Mr. Ziegler's room to Luigi Villa's office. As a matter of fact, Luigi Villa was directly behind Mr. Witherspoon, follow-

ing him into the office. Before I had stepped fully into the room, Mr. Witherspoon slumped forward and fell to the floor. We were all stunned. I remember running to Barry, calling: "Quick, get a doctor! Mr. Witherspoon is ill in Mr. Ziegler's office." I think we all sensed that his fall had been lifeless; we felt immediately that he must be dead. But we tried to revive him.

The bad news spread through the house like a flashfire. In no time at all the office was crowded with anxious faces waiting for the doctor's verdict, though everyone feared that it was too late to hope. The cruellest task came later, when my Boss had to telephone Mrs. Witherspoon. What an unbelievable and heart-rending morning that was, the saddest we ever had in the old Opera House.

But let's go back to Flossie and Barry and happier times. These two had, as I said, first-row seats. They were the first to meet artists coming into the Met, to handle their mail and callers, to see that the right people got through and the wrong people were kept out. They also had key positions in another matter, a very important matter to a lot of people. Flossie and Barry controlled a buzzer contrivance that unlocked the door into a small side entrance which led into the auditorium. It was in their hands to admit the favored to whatever opera happened to be in performance. Sometimes the people coming in through this door had tickets for free seats, but many others had no tickets, and would go into the auditorium and stand. To a real music lover that was never a hardship. What mattered was that they could enter without paying and could come at will.

When there was a sold-out house, the box office would warn the girls to curtail the number of "guests" admitted, but for the most part Flossie and Barry had the decision in their hands. Today, under Mr. Rudolf Bing's administration, it is entirely different. The buzzer still releases the

door for you, but when you have passed through you must sign a large book in charge of a doorkeeper, and must show your credentials. Much tighter rules on "passing in" are in effect today at all entrances.

To guide Flossie and Barry somewhat, though their memories for faces needed no nudging, I had to type what we called the door list. This was a list of those privileged to have the buzzer service, and it carried the same names from year to year, sometimes for no particular reason that I could determine. As I typed this door list from year to year, it seemed to me that once you were on you stayed on. It would include the same old names with a few new ones added each year. A strange lot of people were represented, each one at some time having been a friend of one of the artists (often no longer at the Met), or of the management, or of someone around the Opera House. Having once made themselves known to Flossie and Barry they seemed to remain among the privileged, and became habitués of the Opera House.

To my knowledge there were on this list many voice teachers, newspaper men, wives of former music critics, the barber of one of the artists, old friends of Mr. Gatti who still came after Gatti's retirement, various folk suggested at one time or another by the Publicity Department, and many others who were just names that I typed and faces familiar to Flossie and Barry. They were of all ages and sizes and sometimes queerly dressed, but they had one thing in common, a devotion to grand opera. I imagine that this privilege was one of the most precious things in their lives; that they counted themselves most fortunate to be recognized by the two nice ladies at the desk, who pressed the magic button that opened the door to heaven for them for an afternoon or an evening.

During my years at the Met four of us made it a prac-

tice to lunch together, and we have ever since been friends of long standing. Kathleen Harding and Margaret Curtis of the ballet school, Cornelia (Nellie) Wilcox of the box office, and I made up the quartet. Kathleen has been longest at the Met, some forty-odd years, and is still the secretary of the Metropolitan Opera Ballet School. During the days when Rosina Galli was première danseuse, Kathleen acted as personal secretary to Mme. Galli, and I do mean *personal*. She was constantly at the beck and call of La Galli, twenty-four hours of the day. In addition, she played the piano for the various ballet classes, and took care of the million and one details that came up constantly in connection with the ballet. Kathleen came to the Met from her native England with Mme. Cavallazzi, who opened the first Metropolitan Opera Ballet School. She played the piano so expertly for the ballet classes that she could even carry on a long conversation while playing, yet never missed a single beat of the rhythm as the dancing toes of the prospective ballerinas skipped through their daily exercises.

It was Kathleen's duty to watch over the ballet girls, fine them when they were late, and to see that they always appeared on the stage in proper costume. She also had to take care of the small children whenever any were scheduled to appear in an opera. I remember one time when the company was planning its spring tour and was scheduled to appear in Cleveland. Some young children were needed in one of the operas to be sung there. Miss Harding was quite concerned about the matter, for taking small children on tour is a problem and a responsibility. She thought perhaps it might be possible to engage some children from one of the ballet schools in Cleveland. So one day she decided to take the matter up with Mr. Ziegler, as she must have his permission in either case. Kathleen came into the office and, without thinking, said: "Mr. Ziegler, do you think it would

be possible for us to have some children in Cleveland?" "Of course," he replied with that twinkle in his eye which I knew so well. "But, Miss Harding, need we wait till we get to Cleveland?" Confusion and laughter.

Sir Thomas Beecham conducted a performance of *Carmen* once in Boston, during the Met spring tour. At rehearsals it seemed to some of the ballet girls that his tempo for the ballet music was entirely too fast. There were complaints and much discussion about it but no one dared broach the matter to the Maestro. The performance of *Carmen* was in full swing the night of the opera in Boston, Sir Thomas was conducting vigorously as usual, and the ballet swinging furiously, really going too fast. Suddenly one of the ballet girls, who couldn't take it any longer, pulled off her ballet shoe and flung it over the orchestra pit straight at Beecham. She stopped dancing and moved immediately to the wings, but someone pushed her back on stage. It all proved too much for the poor girl who later had a nervous breakdown, and had to be brought back to New York to a hospital.

I never heard whether the elite of Boston's Back Bay understood what was going on, or whether they just assumed that it was a mishap. However, in hearing the story relayed afterward, a few people at the Met thought it was just too bad that there had not been a foot in the slipper, maybe it would then have made some impression on Sir Thomas, a fine but headstrong conductor.

Kathleen Harding writes songs too—good ones. You might think that with so many singers at hand around the Met, one of them would have given Kathleen a break by singing some of them on a concert program. But this has never happened, though it is hard to believe, considering all her years at the Met. I remember once asking Lawrence Tibbett if he wouldn't listen to some of them. At that time

he was doing a regular weekly program on radio, and I thought perhaps he could use one of them. One night during a performance of *Simon Boccanegra* he did come up to the dressing room next to my office where there was a piano, and Kathleen played a few of her songs for him. There wasn't too much time, of course, but he did seem enthusiastic about one or two, and even held the curtain for ten minutes, listening intently while Kathleen played over the one he liked best. Unfortunately, nothing more came of it.

Kathleen has two charming children, a son and a daughter. Neither of them sing, play the piano, or dance, which is strange when one considers their mother's close contact with all three media. They were practically born on the Met stage, because their mother attended to her duties up to the day before each of the children came into the world. That rather throws out the theory of prenatal influence!

Margaret Curtis, who took over the directorship of the ballet school in 1918, was probably the most kissed woman at the Met. As head of the ballet school she daily received the traditional kiss given by each ballet student upon arrival at class, and again upon bidding their instructor *au revoir*. I would also vote Miss Curtis the most charming woman connected with the Opera House. Soft voice, with gentle good breeding, she had the least amount of temperament to be found in the building. Her students loved her. She taught them in either a skirt and blouse or a dress, and never wore a ballet costume or slacks. In all the years I have known Margaret Curtis I have never seen her dance, yet she is an excellent teacher and instructed such well-known stars as Rita Delaporte and Ruthanna Boris, and many others.

Since Kathleen Harding did all the contact work with the management, I sometimes felt that Margaret Curtis was unknown to Mr. Ziegler. She was so reserved and unobtru-

sive and she slipped quietly in and out of the building. With the reorganization of departments under the new management of Mr. Rudolf Bing, Margaret Curtis has left the ballet school at the Met after some thirty-two years of teaching, and is now happily established in a private school of the ballet.

The other member of the quartet, Cornelia Wilcox—Nellie to all at the Met—has some thirty-five years of service with the Opera House to her credit, and is still a leading member of the box-office staff. If in the past you have ever purchased a ticket for a performance at the Opera House I am sure you have seen Nellie, either at the ticket window or busy in the background. She has been in charge, too, of what may jokingly be called a private ticket service, for she has usually been elected to serve the artists in the matter of tickets and is therefore apt to become a friend of each and every singer. Thinking it over, I do believe there were many artists who never knew that anyone but Nellie was in the box office. Like Flossie and Barry with their buzzer service, Nellie was a good friend to have.

Another old timer at the Met seems to fit in this particular niche of memory, even though he is quite out of place among the girls, and was always shy of the female sex. He is one of the most faithful members of the Met family and a part of us—a small group now—who worked so many years together. John Newman came to the Opera House as a young lad, years before my time, to be a messenger boy. Since he was the only one around to do errands he was kept busy enough for two. Johnny soon exhibited the sterling character that is his: trustworthiness, dependability, accuracy, and a willingness to help out wherever and whenever needed. He soon began to carry to the bank all the daily intake at the Met, and has a record of never having

lost a cent. The artists and the management often entrusted him with all kinds of important and top-secret errands.

When the first World War came along, I understand Johnny went marching off, and was gassed in action. Upon his discharge from the army, though, everyone was delighted to find Johnny back at the Opera House and busy at his old duties. Another job was then added to his list, which he still performs: selling the standee tickets to the Family Circle. You can find Johnny, just before performances, in his little cubbyhole on Fortieth Street, just off Broadway, at the special entrance to the top balcony in our big Opera House, which has no less than five entrances in all.

Johnny Newman is a bachelor. For years we tried to make matches for him, feeling that such a fine young man deserved a good wife, and that a nice young girl would find a splendid husband in Johnny. But John had his own ideas on the subject, seemed very content in his single blessedness, and skillfully evaded all our machinations. No one can say anything but good about Johnny, and Johnny in turn never says an unkind word about anyone, even those who may have abused his patience a bit. In any discussion or gossip, the first thing John will say is: "Don't get me into this." A pretty top guy is this Johnny of the Met, as I always have called him.

Last, but by no means the least in our small group of the old-time staff, are Luigi Villa, Mr. Gatti's secretary for eighteen years, and his brother, Marino Villa. One cannot think of one without immediately remembering the other. Marino's job was handling the advertising for the Met, including all the daily newspaper notices. This was often a harassing job, since sudden changes in cast often involved frenzied work to notify all advertising media before the deadline. In addition Marino handled the transportation of artists to and from Philadelphia during the season, and again

when the company went on tour each spring. The Villas, as we always spoke of them, were two of the nicest people I have ever known, and were utterly devoted to the Met. Luigi went to Italy each summer with Mr. Gatti and handled the many details that kept our general manager busy during his summer sessions abroad. Another member of the Villa family was employed at the Met, Louis Roffino, who helped Luigi with Mr. Gatti's work, and who also handled all matters pertaining to auditions. Louis Roffino sustained the family reputation by being an excellent worker, too, and my association with the three of them is one of my happiest memories. This small group of us on the Thirty-ninth Street side of the house—the executive offices—was a competent and happy and solid link in the big Met family.

"How's your cranky old boss today?" I wish I had a penny for every time that remark was my morning greeting from Earle Lewis. Mr. Lewis and the box office were synonymous. He had come to the Met as quite a young man, and had been there so long that no one thought of any other head of that department. He was in complete charge of all the details and workings of the box office.

Mr. Ziegler was very fond of Mr. Lewis, and it was the influence of my Boss which one day led to the promotion of Earle R. Lewis to assistant general manager. This did not mean that Mr. Lewis relinquished his position as head of the box office, but rather that he took on additional advisory duties. Mr. Gatti and Mr. Ziegler were dual heads in their day. Upon the retirement of Gatti-Casazza, and after the tragic death of Mr. Witherspoon, the Met was run by a triumvirate, consisting of Edward Johnson, the new general manager, with Mr. Ziegler and Mr. Lewis as assistants.

I often marveled at the almost complete separation of the box office from the rest of the house. One rarely saw a box-

office worker in the executive department, or backstage, or even over on the Fortieth Street side of the house. The box office staff lived its working hours in the rooms adjacent to the ticket windows off the main lobby on Broadway, and entered and left the main door on Broadway. The workers were a part of the Met family, yet an unseen part to the people backstage, except on special occasions when we, one and all, gathered for a big event. In the box office Mr. Lewis had his own little realm and was tsar over it.

Besides his efficiency as box office head, Mr. Lewis was known as an unusually fine amateur golfer. His prowess on the golf course brought him into contact with many big businessmen and professional people. With his position at the Metropolitan Opera in addition, he developed over the years a remarkable number of famous acquaintances and friends, whom he prized and about whom he would tell us.

That reminds me of a story. Bing Crosby and a friend came to visit Mr. Lewis one evening after curtain time. The larder was bare and nearby stores were closed. Mr. Lewis asked the box-office men, who were still there, if anything was available in the house in the way of refreshments, and Thurber Wilkins had some liquor to offer. Thurber and Kip Whiteman, the other box-office man on duty, were dressed in tuxedos, their usual evening attire when selling at the box-office windows. Thurber and Kip mixed the drinks and served several rounds to Mr. Crosby and his friend. (Earle Lewis, by the way, has never touched a drop of liquor of any kind. He said that he had promised his mother he would never drink, and he always kept his promise, no matter what company he might be in.)

While the box-office men were serving the pleasant portions, no introductions to, or pleasantries about, Thurber and Kip were forthcoming from Mr. Lewis, and they were undoubtedly taken for waiters from Sherry's bar upstairs

by the visiting celebrities. As Thurber said next day: "I was sore as hell. There he was drinking up all my best liquor and we never even got to meet the 'Great Groaner.'" What amused me most about this was that Thurber and Kit, who were well acquainted with many of the greatest singing stars in the operatic world, were so disappointed at not being introduced to Bing Crosby.

The opera stars were all good friends with Mr. Lewis. After all, he was a powerful man at the Met. He controlled the disposition of all tickets and that in itself would make you want to be in his good graces. Then, too, Mr. Lewis interested himself in the careers of many stars; he liked to help them if he could and he certainly did help many of them. I have had artists tell me that Mr. Lewis would say to them: "Now if anything goes wrong and you can't get on with E.Z."—meaning my Boss—"you just come out and tell me about it and I'll do my best to straighten things out for you." The word backstage was that if you could get E.R.L. interested in you, you were all set.

Many of the new singers who came to the Met during my time, who were later to make outstanding operatic careers for themselves, had Mr. Lewis' kind interest and help. Helen Jepson comes to mind. I remember when she made her debut in *In the Pasha's Garden*. A message came from the box office asking us to take time out to go to the auditorium and applaud, which most of us did. I remember that Flossie Morton was always a great one for clapping, whether she personally liked the artist or not. She would make her way down to the orchestra rail after the performance was over and the star taking bows, and would clap like mad, making sure that she would be seen.

Mr. Lewis was also interested in the careers of Gladys Swarthout, Lily Pons, John Carter, and Richard Crooks. The latter and Mr. Lewis were very good friends and

E.R.L. certainly gave Crooks a helping hand at the beginning of his career. Crooks had a beautiful lyric tenor voice, with a falsetto that he used often and that made many of the ladies swoon. He became a favorite radio star, too, and was on the Firestone Hour for many years. Crooks was also a gay storyteller—not always of parlor stories either. He is still remembered warmly by many people. We all were most regretful when illness forced his retirement. I still remember with great pleasure his singing of “Ah, Moon of My Delight.”

Richard Crooks and I had one special interest in common—dogs. He owned a handsome Irish setter and at the time I had four beautiful red setters. Mr. Ziegler always kidded me about my dogs; I loved to tell him about their good looks and their good points.

Each summer, with the end of the regular season, Mr. Lewis would begin work on his Follies. This was a revue which he put together for presentation at Buck Hill Falls, a Pennsylvania resort in the Pocono Mountains, where he and Mrs. Lewis and their two daughters, Marjorie and Helen, summered for years. Everybody in the Opera House would be interested in, or concerned with, Mr. Lewis' Follies. The electricians, the costumers, the scenic-effects men, all would be called upon to lend a helping hand, and so would many of the artists who were available. The staff would be curious to see what cast and new innovations E.R.L. would produce each year. Local talent was included, I heard, but for the most part the performers were well-known names of opera and radio, for the Met's contract with radio for Saturday matinee broadcasts gave Mr. Lewis an entree there. I was told by people who saw these shows that they were excellent and always were the highlight of the season at Buck Hill Falls.

With all these important contacts and activities on the part of E.R.L., you might think that his was an extrovert personality. Yet it was my point of view, and also that of many others at the Met, that Mr. Lewis was actually a timid person. He always seemed afraid to displease and of what people might think. It was so incongruous with his position that I suppose this trait was the more noticeable and endearing to us. I could never understand it. He was an excellent mathematician and could mentally solve all sorts of difficult problems. An exceedingly clever man, this E.R.L. The box office was his second home.

Mr. Lewis had for many years the able assistance of Thurber Wilkins, the man who donated his liquor for the Bing Crosby visit. Thurber is a quiet-spoken, most capable, and exceedingly kind-hearted fellow, willing to help anyone at any time. A real good friend to have at hand. George Brassil was another of Mr. Lewis' capable assistants. George, however, left the Met and joined forces with the Horse Show and has been with that organization since. George has a sister Eleanor who came to the box office some nineteen years ago, as a very young girl. She is still a part of the original trio—with Thurber and Nellie Wilcox—which stayed on in the box office when Mr. Bing took over the directorship of the Opera House over three years ago. Eleanor too does an excellent job and is liked by everyone.

Louis Snyder also was at one time a member of the box office staff. He then moved to the Press Department and more recently has been put in charge of the details and work of organizing the National Opera Alliance. Louis is a really brilliant chap, and knows a lot more about opera than a great many others who work at the Met. Because of his keen and serious interest in music, Louis is constantly seeing and hearing everything there is to be heard in the concert field, and has besides a tremendous knowledge of

fine music on records. Just as a person is said to be well read, Louis is "well musicked."

The Met has nine thousand subscribers, and not more than about three hundred of them give up their subscription seats in any one season. No wonder seats are always at a premium and that the public is disgruntled to find so few seats for sale at the box office windows. Subscription sales are accomplished for the most part through the mail, and the majority of operagoers have had the same seats for years and years, some families passing them along to younger generations. You can't move subscribers out of their seats and there are very few other seats available. It is as simple as that.

Each year when the question of subscriptions comes up, an elderly lady appears regularly at the box office window asking for a better seat location, and each season the whole situation is explained to her anew. "I've been coming for years," she says, "and no improvements. No improvements this year, either?" Again regrets and explanations, and she is disconsolate and goes off shaking her head and muttering, "Every year I come and no improvements." Let us hope that some day she'll get an improvement.

There are so many, many reasons given by subscribers for wanting a change in seating. Difficulty in hearing and failing eyesight are the usual reasons for asking to be moved to forward seats. The box office tries to be helpful but actually there is little that can be done. One man writes:

I have football knees and I must have an aisle seat, so that I may stretch my legs.

I have heard of housemaid's knee but I swear I never before heard of football knees, but there's a man who has them! Another writes:

I can't stand my seat. The woman in back of me snorts all through the performance and blows her breath down my back. I cannot take it for another season; you *must* move me forward.

Of course the move must always be forward. Or:

The man next to me has false teeth and he keeps gnashing them constantly to the beat of the music. Please, please move me somewhere else. I simply can't *stand* that man another season. He's ruining the opera for me. I've been coming for twenty years; you *must* take care of me.

A patron sitting in Row R came with determination to the window one day and demanded attention. "The odor of the subscriber next to me is sickening, believe me; I don't know whether or not it is her perfume. I don't know, but I simply cannot stand the smell. Please do something for me. I cannot stand it any longer!" Whereupon one of the box-office staff, overhearing the conversation, suggested that she be moved to Row P.

Another old operagoer wails:

Do change my seat, please. The people who sit two seats away from me *always* come in late. They crawl over me, step on my feet, and ruin my dress. I haven't been able to enjoy an overture in years. They always come in when the overture is most interesting and always manage to interrupt my pleasure. Can't you change my seat?

Again:

I must get away from the people next to me. They come regularly, but they have no idea what is happening. They never buy a libretto, they just sit and talk and guess what

is going on. They say Bjoerling is singing when Kullmann is singing; they think it's Ponselle when it's Pons. They don't know *anything*. What *can* one do? Please move me!

A final cry of anguish:

You *must* do something for me. The man and his wife two seats from me leave before the end of every performance. Maybe they do have to catch a train, but that doesn't help me. They climbed over me just when Flagstad was in the middle of the Liebestod! I could have killed them. If they do it again, I *will*! You'd better move me!

To a real opera fan there could be nothing more tragic than being crawled over and annoyed while the incomparable "Liebestod," at the end of *Tristan*, was being sung by the greatest Wagnerian soprano of her day. The box office tries to be sympathetic and to help, and sometimes it can, but just as many times it can do nothing—no, not even if the lady totes her gun with her to the next performance of *Tristan*!

At the end of the regular season, the box office files, usually kept in alphabetical order, are torn apart in order to facilitate the setting up of the seating for the new season. Mrs. Chumley Brown, who would ordinarily be in her proper place in the B's, now is filed under Orchestra, where she sits, and in Row M. When the seating has been completed Mrs. Brown will return to her proper B's. It happens so often as to be unbelievable that a subscriber will come to the ticket window during the interval when the files are out of alphabetical order, and will be unable to remember where she sat for the whole of the previous season or, as happens in the worst cases, she will not even be able to tell on what night of each week she attended the opera! She "thinks" it was the orchestra and "maybe" about the middle

of the house. "But it is so big, you know, I just can't say." And she "guesses" it was on Fridays she attended. If only she could remember, how simple the matter would be. She wishes service and she would like to settle the matter of her seats for the new season right then and there. But now perhaps a thousand odd cards will have to be handled before Mrs. Chumley Brown's turns up!

Since the formation of the Box Office Treasurer's Club, four men have been employed at the Met to sell tickets at the box office windows. They and they alone may hand you your ticket and take your money. If anyone else in the box office should do so, something dire might happen to the poor old Met, so definite are the union rules. The ticket men are involved in very little else of the workings of the box office. Their hours are from 10 A.M. until after curtain time of the evening performance, usually around 9 P.M. The men work in shifts, two at a time at the windows. The girls in the box office handle all the mail orders, hand out reservations in the evening, and answer the telephones day and night.

The box office has no switchboard, so that each telephone call has to be completed before another can be taken. You may have someone on the wire who will hem and haw over seat reservations for fifteen to twenty-five minutes. Or a patron calling from Texas who may talk a half hour about seats. In the meantime the signals on all the other phones are flashing and nothing can be done about them until you can get rid of the party with whom you are talking. The problem of the telephone is terrific when the season is on at the Met. The phones from the ticket agencies are blasting away, the phone from the Opera Guild is ringing, three incoming calls are waiting, and there you may be stuck with someone on the other end of the wire, who actually wants you to give them the story of the opera they would

like to hear, before they decide whether they want to buy a ticket or send in an order for one. There are rumors of a switchboard being installed. Hasten the day!

The box office, with its eternal seating problem, does not seem to change under new management, as do the other departments. Even a change in seating capacity in the orchestra in this new season of 1953-1954 has not made much of a difference. People will continue to come to the ticket windows hoping for a seat for the evening's performance, or for a better seat, and are bound to be disappointed. And always there will be the same old question: "May I have an orchestra seat in the center and on the aisle, please?" And the answer will usually have to be: "No!"

CHAPTER 19

MILKING AND DANCING

AT the World's Fair on Flushing Meadows, in 1939-40, Borden's had on display their famous cow Elsie, who front-paged the papers all over the U.S.A. But long before that, on April 20, 1927, four Maryland cows made the headlines by having four of the best known prima donnas of the day as their milkmaids.

All famous people, singers among them, are showered with invitations, and the top drawer of society usually has the best chance of corralling them. Many are the dinners, cocktail and tea parties, and weekends that the stars could adorn if they would.

One of the biggest parties I ever knew about happened down in Baltimore County, Maryland, on the above date, at the estate of S. Davies Warfield. Mr. Warfield was chairman of the Seaboard Airline, and I believe he was also a substantial guarantor of the Baltimore Opera Season. He was fond of being with the Metropolitan stars while they were on tour and very often would follow the tour to Atlanta in his private car. Mr. Warfield had a handsome southern colonial manor house set in acres of beautiful grounds, which had then been in his family for over a hundred and sixty years. It was called Manor Glen. He was,

by family tradition, a patron of the arts and of the Baltimore Opera, of which Frederick R. Huber was at that time the leading spirit.

The Met spring tour was on the road and parked for the time in Baltimore. Mr. Warfield threw a party for the artists and also invited down for the occasion some of the important people at the Met who were not with the tour. Mr. Ziegler, Earle Lewis, Frank Garlichs, our Treasurer, and Billy Guard, our inimitable press agent always went on tour and of course were at the party. The stars who really provided the occasion for the party were Rosa Ponselle, Lucrezia Bori, Louise Hunter, Francesca Peralta, young Larry Tibbett, Edward Johnson, Ezio Pinza, Antonio Scotti, Leon Rothier, Giuseppe De Luca, George Cehanovsky, Louis Hasselmans, Wilfred Pelletier, Giuseppe Bambo-schek, and Fausto Cleva. The baby of the stars, Marion Talley (and her mother too, of course), was there, with many others of lesser renown. Mr. Warfield, his family, and the elite of Baltimore society completed the party. Also present was Mr. Warfield's niece, Wallis Warfield—now Duchess of Windsor.

The reports of the party were enthusiastic. Mr. Ziegler when he came back to town said the weather had been perfect, the estate very beautiful, the food delicious, the best of southern cooking, lots of long cool drinks, and a servant at hand to fulfill your wishes every time you turned around. The climax of the day was the milking contest. Four well-groomed prize Guernseys, swishing their tails happily, were brought on to the spacious lawn in front of the manor, each in charge of a cowhand all slicked up for the important event. Milking stools and pails were produced and four large, starched, white coverall aprons and caps. Rosa Ponselle, Lucrezia Bori, Francesca Peralta, and Louise Hunter were chosen to be the milkmaids. They donned

their regalia, the gentlemen gallantly placed the stools and pails, the ladies seated themselves and made some attempt at milking. The gentlemen rallied round and called encouragement and made suggestions, and a delightful time was had by all. Mr. Ziegler was a judge, by the way, with Scotti and Mrs. Walter W. Keith.

Pictures by the dozen were taken. (You'll see one in this book.) Mr. Warfield had a professional photographer on hand who took the party standing before the handsome house, in groups around the grounds, in pairs, and singles, and of course a close-up of each milkmaid doing her stunt. Mr. Warfield, a southern colonel in manners as well as in looks, could not choose one maid alone as winner from among the four stars, so he presented each of the contestants with a beautiful silver trophy cup, so fortuitously inscribed beforehand with each winner's name:

MANOR GLEN FARMS CUP

Presented by

S. DAVIES WARFIELD

to

MISS ROSA PONSELLE

Winner of

Milking Contest

at

Manor Glen

Maryland

April 20, 1927

A few weeks after the party there arrived at the Met for Mr. Ziegler, and for each of the artist guests at Manor Glen, a green leather photograph album, inscribed in gold lettering on the cover:

CHAMPIONSHIP MILKING CONTEST AND LUNCHEON

MANOR GLEN, BALTIMORE COUNTY, MARYLAND

Wednesday, April 20, 1927

Inside the cover of the album, pasted on pages, were twenty professional photographs, nine-and-a-half by seven-and-three-quarters, taken the day of the luncheon and contest. Mr. Ziegler and I were open-mouthed at these albums. There was a photograph of each milkmaid in her milking outfit, sitting to her task, full face of the contestant, and rear end of the cow (with a bow on her tail), turned to the camera. This so intrigued me that Mr. Ziegler gave me one of the albums which I still delight in looking over.

Where, oh where, are the parties of yesteryear? Or rather, where, oh where, is the money that paid for them?

But a little later we were to have one more great party to remember. Noise and confusion, such as the old Opera House had not heard or seen since the day its building began, echoed and resounded throughout the great auditorium. All the anvils in the famous Anvil Chorus were just a sweet tinkle compared to the daily din then in progress. It was April, 1933. The season of 1932-33 had ended. An Opera Ball was in the making and the auditorium was being transformed into a ballroom, one that was to rival any in the famous palaces abroad or the great houses of wealth here at home.

Lumber! Lumber! Lumber in piles down the aisles, stacked over the orchestra seats, in the boxes, in the foyer, in the wings. And a hundred carpenters with a hundred hammers banged away at nails, driving with speed and fury, each one playing his own noisy extravaganza. What

must the old house be thinking! How could its sensitive musical ear stand up under this onslaught of sound!

With each piece of lumber being pounded into place came a grumble from the carpenters of the house staff, who were working long hours to rip out seats in seemingly reckless fashion, seats which usually had to be kept in good repair, and which would have to be replaced when this whole business was over.

"All this for *one* night. It's nuts!" the crew said again and again. In place of the ripped-out chairs, posts were nailed down which were to support the weight of a new temporary flooring. All very necessary for the plans ahead, the men had to agree, but still "damn stupid business!"

I would peek in each day to see the progress being made, and stared with amazement at the rapidity with which the new floor was taking shape, covering up the orchestra seats and the pit. One day I found the work finished and the debris swept up. Now would begin the work of building twenty-eight new boxes, which were to be at floor level around the great Horseshoe, just below the parterre boxes. New steps were to be built at either side of the stage to the new floor.

The Opera Ball was to be the 1933 contribution toward the series of campaigns designed to "Save the Met." (Poor old Met! It still is being "saved" season after season.) The radio and newspaper and mail campaigns of other years, with all their turmoil and labor and discouragements and long working hours, were simple efforts compared to this spring 1933 idea. The committees and chairman and assistant chairman were numerous, too numerous. Each committee and each member thereof felt a right to call upon the Opera House and the staff for help, often over the most trivial and inconsequential of questions. Our phone rang all day long and at night. Important New Yorkers were at Mr.

Ziegler's door, one after the other, for days and days and endless days, with questions, demands, orders, and constant interruptions to the routine work which had to be done. Offices had to be set up outside the Opera House for the running of the campaign, but this seemed to make but little difference in the demands made upon my Boss. The staff said jokingly, but almost meaning it, that this year we would all surely die to save the Met.

The Ball was to be an unusually "Social" affair. What was left of the wealthy *crème de la crème* of the old Four Hundred composed the list of patrons and patronesses. The Astors, Belmonts, Morgans, and Vanderbilts were there. The best-known names in all the arts—the theater, the musical world, writing, painting, architecture—were all called upon to lend their names and their support. The four most important committees were these:

COMMITTEE ON PRODUCTION

Ben Ali Haggin, *Chairman*

Kenneth Murchison Arthur Ware Whitney Warren

OPERA COMMITTEE

Merle Alcock	Olive Fremstad	Ezio Pinza
Paul Althouse	Claudio Frigerio	Lily Pons
Pasquale Amato	Rosina Galli	Rosa Ponselle
Arthur Anderson	Amelita Galli-Curci	Elisabeth Rethberg
Rose Bampton	Frieda Hempel	Leon Rothier
Richard Bonelli	Kathleen Howard	Ernestine Schumann-Heink
Lucrezia Bori	Frederick Jagel	Marcella Sembrich
Ina Bourskaya	Edward Johnson	Marie Sundelius
Sophia Braslau	Queenie Mario	Gladys Swarthout
Leonora Corona	Giovanni Martinelli	John Charles Thomas
Richard Crooks	Margaret Matzenauer	Lawrence Tibbett
Adamo Didur	Nina Morgana	Marie Tiffany

PROFESSIONAL COMMITTEE

Irving Berlin	Katharine Cornell	Lynn Fontanne
Fanny Brice	Noel Coward	George Gershwin
Ina Claire	Frank Crowninshield	Jascha Heifetz
Irvin Cobb	Walter Damrosch	Theresa Helburn
Marc Connelly	Edna Ferber	Arthur Hopkins

Sidney Howard	Neysa McMein	Deems Taylor
Fannie Hurst	Paul Manship	Charles Hanson Towne
Jerome Kern	Gilbert Miller	Joseph Urban
Rollin Kirby	Sigmund Romberg	Louis Wiley
Eva Le Gallienne	Cornelia Otis Skinner	Peggy Wood
Alfred Lunt	Albert Spalding	Ed Winn
	Oлга Samaroff Stokowski	

Most important committee of all—and what a mouthful!—was the:

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE CAMPAIGN TO SAVE
THE METROPOLITAN OPERA

Lucrezia Bori, *Chairman*

Cornelius N. Bliss	Charles Hayden	Marcella Sembrich
Robert S. Brewster	Theodore Hetzler	Lawrence Tibbett
Paul D. Cravath	Edward Johnson	Adrian Van Sinderen
R. Fulton Cutting	Thomas H. McInerney	Henry Rogers Winthrop
John Erskine	Frederic Potts Moore	

Miss Bori was also Chairman of the Ball, and had as her assistants, Mrs. Chester Burden and Mrs. Robert Littell of the New York Junior League Bureau for Entertainments with offices at Saks-Fifth Avenue. From that office the invitations had long since been sent out and the tickets sold. Down at the Opera House the new floor was shining and waxed. The new boxes were furnished and refurbished. The Opera Ball of April 28, 1933, was all set to go. A pageant devised by Ben Ali Haggin began the festivities.

It told a story of Paris in the spring during the Second Empire, at the time of Queen Victoria's visit to Napoleon III and Empress Eugénie. The Opera was transformed into a great ballroom. A sumptuous box had been erected on the stage as royal visitors were to attend. The artists and composers of Paris were giving the ball. It was a brilliant and gala affair, thrilling and filled with excitement.

To martial music troops march and station themselves about the royal enclosure. Members of the Court arrive, officers in full regalia, beautiful ladies in gowns of lace and

thistledown, followed by others—a kaleidoscope of color that cannot be described.

Fanfare of trumpets, ruffle of drums. Sabers flash at the salute. The Master of Ceremonies announces Their Imperial Majesties, the Emperor and Empress of France: "*Vive l'Impératrice, Vive l'Empereur!*"

The Empress stands atop the great staircase. All eyes are fixed on her. She is radiant, smiling. She enters the imperial box, graciously acknowledging the welcome. The Emperor stands behind her.

Another flourish of trumpets, roll of drums. The Austrian hymn is played by the orchestra. Dashing officers, resplendent in the uniform of the White Hussars enter, and one proclaims the arrival of Their Imperial Majesties, the Emperor and Empress of Austria, King and Queen of Hungary. (It doesn't matter too much that Franz Joseph and Elisabeth never did get to Paris!)

Trumpets sound again and tall, scarlet-coated guardsmen form a lane. Her Majesty, the Queen of England, enters.

Cymbals crash—a thrilling Slavic air—a clear-voiced proclamation. Their Imperial Majesties, the Emperor and Empress of Russia arrive. (Too bad they didn't, really!)

And so it goes on. Ambassadors and envoys, representatives of all countries of the world are there.

The Empress Eugénie was played by Mrs. August Belmont, who, as Eleanor Robson, had been famous as an actress on Broadway. It was natural that Mrs. Belmont should play her part in realistic perfection. Her Napoleon was Mr. Boutet de Monvel. In the Court of Austria, the lovely Elisabeth was the then Mrs. Vincent Astor and Franz Joseph was played by Prince Chlodwig Hohenlohe-Schillingsfuerst. Mrs. John H. G. Pell was Queen Victoria and Mr. Geoffrey McN. Gates the personable Prince Consort. Victoria's Mistress of the Robes, the Duchess of Wellin-

ton, was impersonated by Mrs. Harrison Williams, always on the list of the ten best-dressed women anywhere. Mr. Cecil Beaton was the Groom of the Robes, Major General F. H. Seymour. Mr. Ben Ali Haggin played the part of the Ambassador from the Ottoman Empire.

Then followed a program given by Metropolitan artists and other musicians, entitled *Divertissement Offered by the Artists and Composers of the Paris Opera to Her Imperial Majesty, Eugénie, Empress of the French*. The program follows:

Sextette—"Un Ballo in Maschera"

Ulrica.....	Mme. Ina Bourskaya	Renato..	Mr. George Cehanovsky
Oscar.....	Mme. Aida Doninelli	Samuel.....	Mr. James Wolf
Riccardo...Mr.	Giovanni Martinelli	Tommaso...	Mr. Louis D'Angelo

M. Charles Gounod, Guest Conductor.....Mr. Wilfred Pelletier

Mlle. Jenny Lind, Songs.....Miss Frieda Hempel
Courtesy of P. T. Barnum, Esquire

Silver Flute Obligato.....Mr. Georges Barère

M. Hector Berlioz, Conducting the "Rakoczy March".....
 Mr. Ernest Schelling
The Zouaves.....7th Regiment, N.Y.N.G.

Mlle. Christine Nilssen, SongsMiss Grace Moore

The Ensemble of Harps

Miss Marietta Bitter
 Miss Inez Bretley
 Miss Marjorie Call

Miss Mary Griffith
 Miss Ariel Perry
 Miss Reva Reatha

Mr. Carlos Salzedo

La TaglioniMiss Patricia Bowman

M. Franz Liszt—Conducting his 14th Rhapsody.....

Mr. Walter Damrosch

M. Liszt introduces Herr Richard Wagner... Mr. Theodore Steinway
 and Mr. Giacomo Meyerbeer.....Mr. Harold Bauer

The Old Guard of the First Empire

Captain W. M. Hamilton

Lieutenant W. F. Bayard

Lieutenant F. V. Sutherland

Lieutenant Harry J. Johnson

Dr. A. W. Friend

Lieutenant J. R. Laird

Sergeant E. B. Glavis

M. Paganini Mr. Albert Spalding
Mlle. Adelina Patti, Songs..... Miss Lucrezia Bori

M. Johann Strauss, Conducting his waltz "Vienna Woods"
Mr. Jascha Heifetz

Exit of the Court

FINIS

So ended the magnificent spectacle, the thrilling diversissement. One after another royalty and nobility stepped upon the great dance floor and the beautifully gowned and jeweled spectators from the boxes joined them. Swirling to the strains of the first dance music, the lovely old *Blue Danube Waltz*, the dancers went round and round, as Ben Ali Haggin said, "in a kaleidoscope of color and loveliness that cannot be described."

Given the courts of Napoleon III and his chic Eugénie, of Franz Joseph and his lovely Elisabeth, of Victoria and Albert of proud old England, of Alexander and his Tsarina of Imperial and fantastic Russia, one can imagine with what glee, enthusiasm, research, flights of fancy, and reckless expenditure the couturiers of New York's great shops went to work, outdoing each other in designing and making the magnificent costumes for the ladies who were to perform in the pageant, and for those who were to occupy the boxes as spectators. Huge hoop skirts of satins, velvets, and brocades of such beauty that they needed no adornment were the order of the evening. Priceless laces had been used, and spangles and sequins added allure and glitter. And the jewels! The bank vaults of New York must have been empty for the night, and every important jeweler in town must

have loaned his most precious gems. The Met was well insured and well protected for the evening, but it was good that nothing went amiss.

And now to the gentlemen! Tonight they rivaled the ladies in the color, the magnificence of their costumes. Kings and princes and dukes in white satin with gold, and blue with silver, and jeweled decorations. And the military—great dashing capes swung jauntily across the shoulder, revealing startling and colorful linings. There was enough gold and silver braid among them to go around Manhattan Island, and enough gold buttons to fill Grant's Tomb.

I stood off to one side, feasting my eyes on the color, the dazzle of this wonderful Opera Ball in our old and familiar yet transformed Opera House. Nothing but beauty met the eye. I felt that I should never again see such a magnificent spectacle. Standing fascinated, I myself was suddenly whirled on to the dancing floor. Frank Wenker, dear old Bill Guard's assistant in Publicity, claimed the first dance. What a thrill to find myself among kings and queens, waltzing to the *Blue Danube*, brushing against the Tsar of all the Russias, and the handsome Prince Consort of England. Like Cinderella at the ball!

After a while some of the staff went up to the Dress Circle to look down upon the dance floor. (The balconies had not been sold for this evening. As one might imagine, this was not a night for the hoi polloi and we of the executive staff counted ourselves fortunate in being there.) Too bad that no color motion picture cameras recorded the sight. What a TV telecast this would have made!

Two things come to mind that concerned our little group that night. My friend Cornelia Wilcox of the box office staff joined with me in hiring a room for the night at the nearby Lincoln Hotel, at Forty-fifth Street and Eighth Avenue. We both lived out of town and had to bring our

finery and overnight clothing with us from home that morning, packed in heavy suitcases. As we were starting for the hotel to eat and to dress, lugging our bags, we ran into a young man in the Thirty-ninth Street office of the Met. He often hobnobbed with the box office staff and I had seen him around the offices. The Met always has been a magnet to young people who are interested in music and the arts, and some of them get an "in," as we say. Our young man, whom I knew only as Dick, gallantly relieved us of the heavy load, and walked with us to the hotel, much to our relief, earning our gratitude. I wonder if Richard Kollmar of "Dorothy and Dick" fame remembers his good-scout deed that evening?

The other pleasant happening on the same evening, I must confess, involved a little trickery, but I remember it only with delight and with no regret. The few of the staff who were present at the Opera Ball did not of course pay their way in. It was quite beyond our means in the first place, and in the second place the Met was home to us. Neither could we afford the price of the elaborate dinner served in the restaurant on the second floor of the Opera House by caterer Emil Katz. My recollection is that the tickets cost some fifteen dollars. However, we did get into the restaurant and did have something to eat, all on one ticket which one of us had been given. I can't remember who first had the idea, but we were all equally guilty! This sleight-of-hand performance was all done in fun. We were slap-happy by then, and were all willing to put one over on Mr. Katz. We did!

The procedure was to enter the restaurant's main door by showing your ticket, to proceed to the long table which had been set up in smorgasbord style, to help oneself, and to surrender the ticket. The first member of our little set dutifully showed our precious ticket at the door, helped

himself to a plate of food and casually strolled away without handing in the ticket. After the pageant was over and the dancing had begun and people were getting hungry, the confusion in the restaurant was indescribable. It was not too difficult a task to escape the waiter's eye. Our co-conspirator strolled to a corner of the big room where there was a hidden door known only to the habitués of the Met. He passed out the ticket to the next of us to practice chicanery.

There was always the chance that one culprit would be asked for the ticket and have to surrender it. This peril kept us in a hilarious mood outside the door, waiting to see if the ticket would appear.

Our luck held and we all were soon inside. Across the room at the bar, our master mechanic, Fred Hosli, was enjoying himself. He saw—and probably heard—us and invited all of us over to the bar, treating us to two champagne cocktails apiece, which added spice and more gaiety to our party. Our only disappointment was the food. We all decided it wasn't worth the effort we made to get it, but of course we should have been the very last to complain!

We "patronized" the Beer Garden too, this time paying for our food and drinks. A typical German-Austrian beer garden had been set up on the second floor near the restaurant. Here beer and hot dogs were dispensed and tasted better to us than the more pretentious food. That reminds me of the last page of the elegant and formal program of the Opera Ball. The beginning of the program was dedicated to royalty but on the last page we were brought down to earth. It read:

Acknowledgments

The following companies have contributed to the Beer Garden:

Rolls supplied by Ellas Baking Company
Frankfurters supplied by Adolph Goebel, Inc.
White Rock water supplied by the White Rock Mineral
Springs Company
Ginger Ale supplied by Canada Dry Ginger Ale Company
Orange drinks supplied by Nedick's
Pretzels supplied by National Biscuit Company
Beer supplied by Schaefer
Paper cups supplied by Lily-Tulip Cup Company

Guess the Met must have had to supply the mustard!

At three o'clock in the morning we of the staff had to leave, for we had work to do the next morning, unlike the kings and queens and the nobility who danced until dawn. After all, we had to carry on "Saving the Met" come ten o'clock that same day.

As we passed the parterre boxes on our way out we saw many a gay party still going on. All restrictions were off for the staid old Opera House that night and drinks could be served in the boxes. When the cleaning women arrived at six o'clock in the morning, just after the ball had ended, they found a few exhausted cavaliers and sleeping beauties in several of the little anterooms back of the parterre boxes. They were awakened and told that the Met had been saved for the moment and they could go on home.

Probably if all the money spent on food and drink that night, and the cost of tickets and of gowns and of production had been contributed to the "Save-the-Met" campaign, the sum would have been enormous and enough to cover deficits for a couple of seasons. One other Opera Ball was given and then the idea was dropped. But it was something wonderful to have seen and to be able to remember.

CHAPTER 20

HELEN'S BACK!

TIME will march on! Edward Johnson retired as general manager and Rudolf Bing took over for the season of 1950-51. Earle Lewis too retired and went to live down south. Edward Ziegler, my Boss, the most unforgettable character at the Met, was gone, though probably right now he is looking down paternally on the stars below. The great duo of Gatti-Casazza and Ziegler, and the telling triumvirate of Johnson-Ziegler-Lewis, whose management had given forty-two outstanding years of grand opera at the Met, were monuments of the past. A few years of singing, of teaching and traveling had kept me busy since leaving the Met. Now it was early 1953 and I sat considering new personal plans when the telephone rang. How was I to know that it was fate?

"Is this Miss Klaffky?" a man's voice asked.

"Yes, this is Helen Klaffky Noble," I answered.

"I wonder if you remember me," the voice went on. "I am Francis Robinson of the Metropolitan Opera."

"Of course, Mr. Robinson," I said. "You are the assistant general manager, and I believe you have taken over Mr. Lewis' place."

"Yes, I have," he continued, "and I am wondering if you

would be at all interested in coming back to the Met? I have need of experienced assistance in the box office at the moment. Would you consider helping us out?"

Had an atom bomb exploded in my vicinity I could not have been more dazed. This was something I had never considered. My Met days were over. I had just about finished writing this book, and was putting my memories back on the shelf.

"You said—back to the Met!" I gasped.

"Don't make up your mind today," Mr. Robinson said, undoubtedly sensing my confusion. "Think it over, call me sometime tomorrow. We'd like to have you, you know."

"Yes—of course—thank you. Yes, I'll call you tomorrow."

I threw myself back into an easy chair, my mind awlirl. Suddenly I began to realize anew what my twenty years at the Met meant to me. I thought first of my old friends there, the small group of old-timers carried over into the new regime. It *would* be nice to see them more often.

But then, with a stab in my heart, I remembered that Mr. Ziegler would not be there. Everything would be so different for me; would I like it? Another thought came: only a very few of the great singers I so admired and listened to so raptly in the past would be singing. No Geraldine Farrar, no Chaliapin, no Scotti, no Amelita Galli-Curci, no Elisabeth Rethberg, no Lotte Lehmann, no De Luca, no Schumann-Heink, no Martinelli, no Gigli. Rosa Ponselle, Kerstin Thorborg, John Charles Thomas, Richard Crooks, Karin Branzell, Leon Rothier, Bruna Castagna, Titta Ruffo—they too were no longer at the Met. And neither would I hear singing again on the great stage wonderful old Louis D'Angelo or Bidu Sayao, Marion Telve or Friedrich Schorr, José Mardones or Grace Moore, the delightful artist. Nor Michael Bohnen, Rose Bampton, Lauri-Volpi, or our own Edward Johnson; nor the sizzling Maria Jeritza. And how

greatly I would miss Bori and Tibbett, Gladys Swarthout and Ezio Pinza, Lauritz Melchior and the incomparable Flagstad! Great voices and illustrious artists, hardworking and painstaking artists. What a privilege, I thought, to have known them, to have heard every role they sang at the Met, to have absorbed the beauty they gave to the world of opera.

Had other great singers come to take their places? Perhaps I'd better go back to the Met and see. *The voice!* That, I said to myself, is the thing. That's what I have learned over the years. *The voice is the thing!* That's what people go to the Opera House to hear: a *great* voice singing the brilliant arias of Wagner, Verdi, Rossini and Puccini; of Donizetti, Mascagni, Gounod; of Bizet, Mozart and Leoncavallo. The scenery may be a bit worn, but if the stage is dominated by a great singer with a glorious voice, you will have an enthusiastic audience, which will leave the Opera House saying, "Wasn't it *wonderful* tonight!"

The Met used to be criticized by the music critics and others for using the same old scenery year after year. The cost of new scenery was usually quite beyond the budget, even then. But there was another angle, as I found out by listening to the very interesting reactions of some of the regular operagoers. This was the feeling of familiarity and intimacy which the old scenery gave them. Butterfly's room overlooking the sea, Marguerite's house and garden, Violetta's drawing room, Baron Scarpia's dining room, the castle garden scene in the second act of *Tristan* where the lovers meet, the bleak attic in *Bohème*, the little house and garden of Louise and Julien overlooking Paris—all these were familiar and loved scenes. The subscribers continually asked for better seats, it was true, but they did not often ask for new and startling scenery. They liked a bit of repainting and refurbishing, such as one might do naturally in one's

own home: a new color scheme, a new chair perhaps, a new chandelier, a different table. But on the whole they liked familiar scenes; they did not want the scenery to intrude upon their listening. I have seen many opera fans listening with closed eyes, devoting themselves to the music and the voices, not wanting to miss a single golden tone.

I have a picture now in my mind's eye of Mr. Ziegler, Mr. Gatti, the current scene designer, the conductor, and the stage director sitting around a big table, with the libretto and score of a new opera, or of some revival, in front of them. They would read and study the words and music, immersing themselves in the mood of the musical drama, trying to find out what the composer and the librettist had in mind as a background for the plot and the music. In the end, the words, the music, and the scenery would become a harmonious whole. Except for a new opera or a revival that needed new scenery, the old setting had to be used for years, but *great voices* came to the Met during Mr. Gatti's and Mr. Johnson's regimes, and that seemed to be the thing that counted.

My mind went back to the singers at the Met. Often I wondered (and still do) if the general public ever realizes the demands great voices make upon the singers. The artists must lead disciplined lives. Others may celebrate wildly after a performance, but not the singers. Their lives must revolve around their voices. Tomorrow will bring a rehearsal, and the singer must be in top form for rehearsals as well as for performances. Always there is the necessity and the strain of being at one's best. Critics are everywhere: in the audiences, in the press, in the auditorium at rehearsals, backstage, and in the front office.

Singers produce tones with the entire body, with muscles and with nerves. They must keep themselves in good physical form, they must practice, practice, practice. Haven't

you heard people say: "She has a God-given voice"? They think that an extra-special music box has been put into the throat by the good Lord, and that all one has to do is to open the mouth to produce lovely music. God-given a voice may be, but it is unceasing hard work and painstaking effort and everlasting intelligent practice which bring one to the status of a *great* singer! I have talked with many of our famous artists and I never heard any other formula.

Luigi Villa popped into my mind—Luigi who took such good care of Mr. Gatti for eighteen years. (Helen at one time or another took care of practically everybody else.) I thought of the Met's staggering schedules in those days. Besides the six subscription performances each week, we had a Tuesday night performance in either Brooklyn or Philadelphia, and some weeks played in both cities on the same night. Sunday nights there was always the opera concert. Many benefit performances were given as additional matinees each week. That used to be a favorite way of raising money for charity. Our season then was twenty-four weeks long. And the spring tours—what a headache they were, with the tremendous amount of paper work, telegraphing, and telephoning entailed, and constant emergencies to meet. Off to Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, Atlanta, Cleveland, Boston, and Rochester, the tour would go, and two or three of us would be left in New York at the end of the telephone wire to meet emergency calls coming from along the way. My colleague Luigi Villa and I took all this work in our secretarial stride.

Well, should I or shouldn't I? Should I or shouldn't I? I must stop thinking about everything else and face this decision. Go back in a new capacity, under a new management, in such different times? Should I or shouldn't I? But, I reminded myself, what a thrill it will be to hear again in rehearsal and performance the great voices at the Met, to

see new beautiful settings, and to greet my old friends. Then to meet and work with the new management—Mr. Rudolf Bing, who was doing so many new and interesting things at the Met. How thankful I was to him for having brought Flagstad back in that magnificent production of *Alceste*. Thankful, too, for the thrilling production of *Così Fan Tutti*, the delightful *Fledermaus*, and the wonderful revival of *Boris Godunov*. Another big thank you, Mr. Bing, for such singers as De los Angeles, Amara, Peters, Barbieri, Miller, Nikolaidi, London, Hines, Siepi, Uppman and others too numerous to mention.

I remembered my first meeting with Mr. John Gutman—an impromptu audition one of my pupils gave (at the request of the box office staff) one hot summer day. Mr. Gutman was kind and encouraging.

Mr. Reginald Allen, the business manager and another assistant to Mr. Bing, I had heard of for years because of his connection with the Philadelphia orchestra. More recently I had heard through the grapevine that both he and Mr. Max Rudolf, the musical secretary, were both charming gentlemen with whom it was a joy to be associated.

Yes, it would be exciting to work for this new regime. That old feeling was stealing over me, the lure of the Met which I thought was forever out of my life. Even after interesting years spent elsewhere, the call to work at the Met was something I could not resist. I knew I'd be delighted to go back as one of the few members of the staff ever to be re-engaged. Okay, Helen, you're going back, I said to myself.

The next day I telephoned Mr. Robinson and said I would go back to help out temporarily.

Soon after my return, Mr. Robinson reminded me of something I had forgotten completely: early in his career, shortly after he had graduated from college, he had come

to the Met to secure an interview with Mr. Ziegler, and my preoccupied Boss had been cold to him. "But," he told me, "Helen, I will never forget how kind and helpful you were to me then." Of course it was no more than I always tried to do, but still I was pleased. By the same token, I shall never forget Francis Robinson's kindness in remembering me after so many years.

So once again I found myself stepping through the Fortieth Street stage-door entrance. The thrill of being back in the old Opera House made me feel like my old self again, ready and willing to work at anything for the sake of the Met and its fine traditions.

As I walked across the big stage I was warmly greeted by some of the old stagehands who remembered me; who remembered too the days when I was secretary to everyone and did anything there was to be done around the premises. One of them, standing at the back of the stage, called loudly and jokingly: "Fire eighteen secretaries! Helen's back!"

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